

VII

Author: Yukiya Murasaki

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ALINA
the Sword Princess

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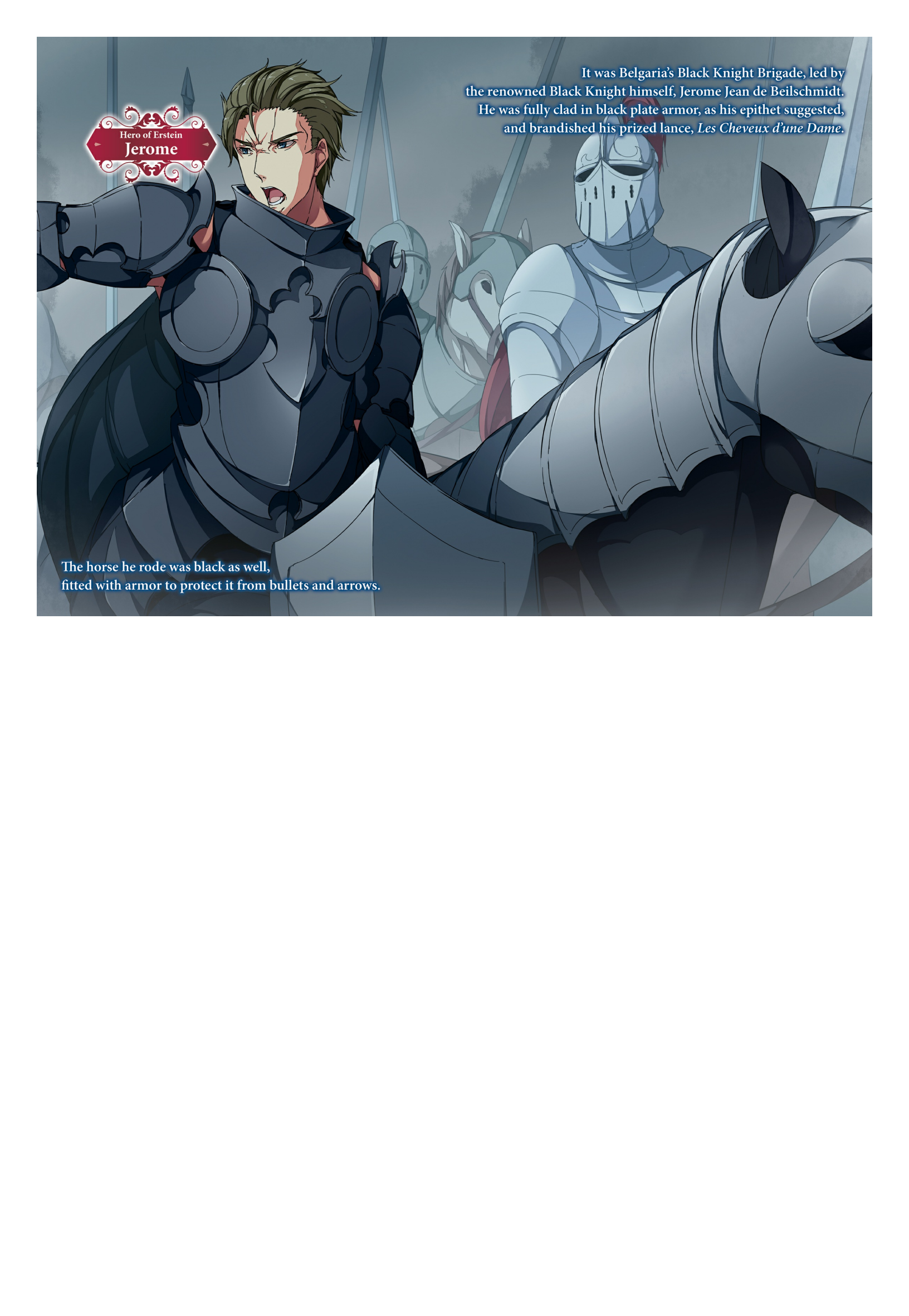


Sword-Wielding Princess
Altina

“Do you
think we
can win?”

Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis

“Allow me to put it
this way— if we fail to defeat
the enemy’s supply unit under
the current circumstances, then
I’d have to suspect they have
a *real* wizard in their ranks.”



Hero of Erstein

Jerome

It was Belgaria's Black Knight Brigade, led by the renowned Black Knight himself, Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt. He was fully clad in black plate armor, as his epithet suggested, and brandished his prized lance, *Les Cheveux d'une Dame*.

The horse he rode was black as well, fitted with armor to protect it from bullets and arrows.

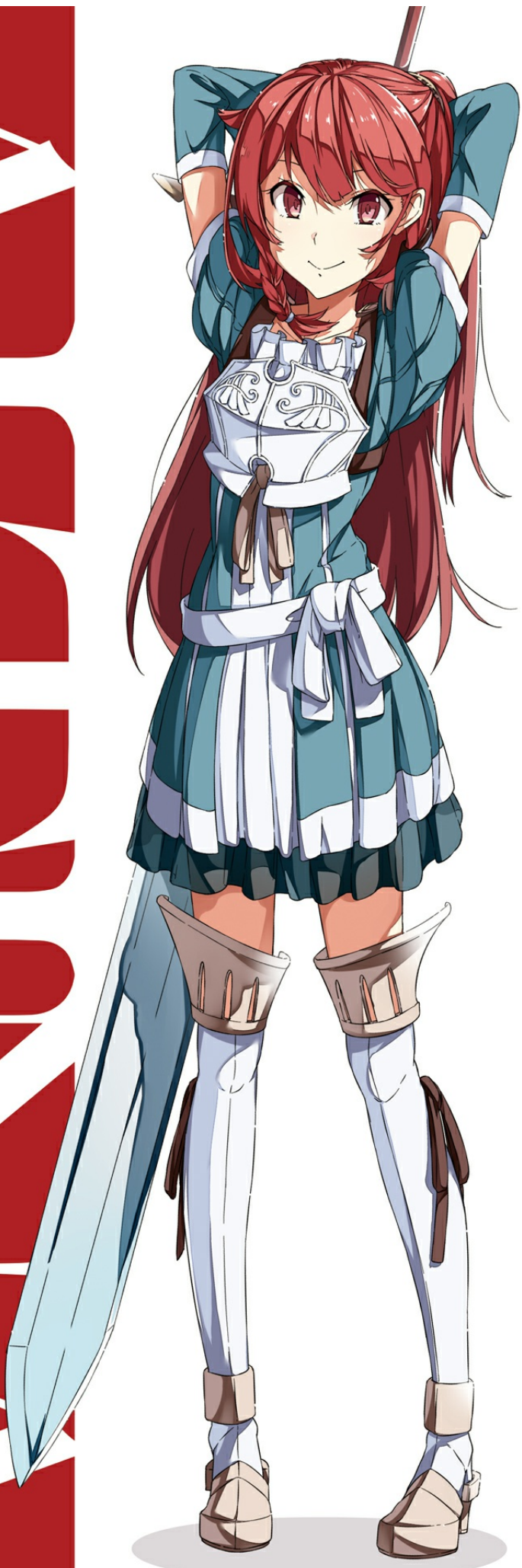


“It is a
pleasure
to make your
acquaintance,
princess of
the Empire.”

Mercenary King
Gilbert

“A three-pointed
spear... You must be
Gilbert Schweinzeberg,
the Mercenary King.”

ARIA the Sword Princess





Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria

Fourth princess of the Belgian Empire. She was named after her mother's homeland of Argentina, and is known as "Altina" for short. Boasting red hair and crimson eyes, she swings around the Grand Tonnerre Quatre, a sword even taller than she is.

She has resolved to try and become the next empress for the sake of those suffering under the Empire's tyranny.



Clarisse

A maid six years older than Altina who has been by the princess's side for as long as she can remember. Altina trusts her from the depths of her heart. While Clarisse is usually silent like a doll, she tends to joke incessantly with anyone she's taken a liking to.

Regis Aurick



Fifth-grade administrative officer.

A bibliophage who dreamed of becoming a librarian in the military library. He was an abject failure in the military academy, unable to swing a sword, draw a bow, or even ride a horse. The abundance of knowledge he has obtained from his books does give him some talent as a tactician, however.





Eddie Fabio de Balzac

First-grade combat officer. The new head of the House of Balzac, famous for its outstanding swordsmanship. Despite having inherited his house's aptitude for swordplay, Eddie has never cut down a person on the battlefield. The sword he carries, the Défendre Sept, has been passed down in his family since the days of the first emperor.

Carlos Liam Auguste de Belgaria

First prince of the Belgarian Empire. When the real Auguste was assassinated, his younger sister Felicia stood in and assumed his identity. As of now, she has abandoned her claim to the throne and is living in Fort Volks with Eddie.





Eric Mickaël de Blanchard

A Belgian knight and the grandson of Everard. While serving in Marquis Thénézay's army, he was deeply impressed by Regis's command, and personally volunteered to be sent to the front lines to chase after the man he respected so much.

Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt



Revered as an accomplished general, he was driven to the border by those envious of his achievements. He would spend his days as the de facto commander of Fort Sierck drinking and gambling, but he surrendered this position when Altina bested him in a duel.





Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria

Third prince of the Belgarian Empire. Detesting the very notion of getting involved in power struggles, he left Belgaria to study in High Britannia. Frustrated that his siblings were being handed treasured swords left and right, he may or may not have secretly made off with the Vite Espace Trois.

Alain Deux Latrielle de Belgaria

Second prince of the Belgarian Empire. The son of the queen, he possesses talent in both military and civil affairs. While officially serving as the commander of the First Army, he has seized control over the entire imperial army in the stead of his elderly father and the sickly first prince.

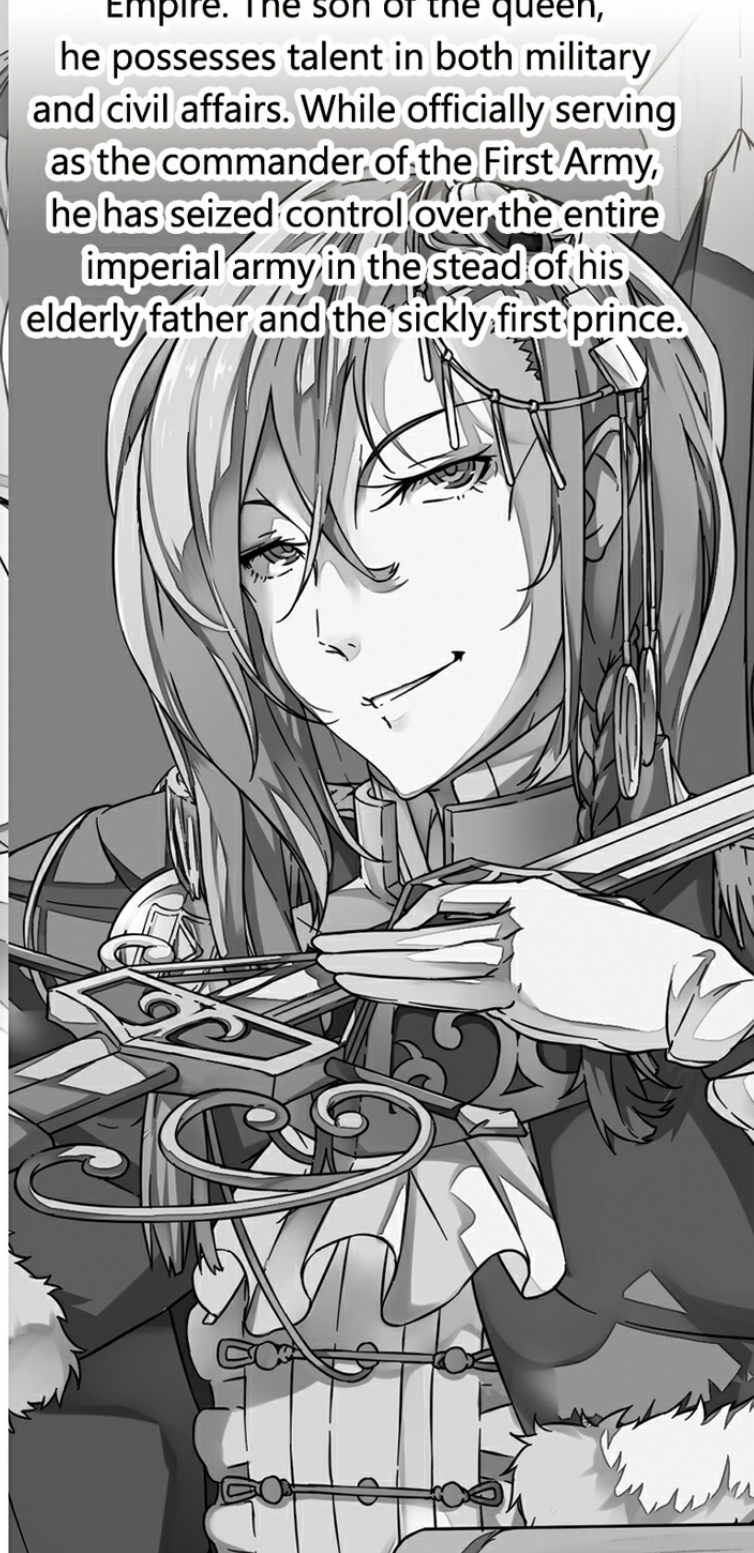




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The story so far—

Inept with a sword, unable to ride a horse, and apathetic toward the empire he serves, Regis Aurick is a hopeless soldier who spends his days buried in books.

The year is 850 on the Belgarian imperial calendar—

Having been banished to Fort Sierck on the northern front, Regis was approached by the tenacious Fourth Princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria—“Altina” for short—a stunning young woman whose imperial lineage was denoted by her crimson hair and red eyes. The daughter of a commoner, she was shunned by the queen and other high nobles, eventually being appointed commander of a faraway border regiment at the unprepared age of fourteen.

Under normal circumstances, her time would have been spent idly, the empty title making her little more than a decoration. But the impassioned princess, having spent her adolescence caught between internal struggles for power, aspires for something greater. She has seen the strife caused by self-seeking nobles—the ruthless taxation and pointless wars—and so resolves to change the country!

“I’m going to become empress. I need your wisdom.”

Altina soon proves her mettle as a commander by taking on the hero Jerome, and while Regis feels no more confident in his own abilities, he swears to work as her tactician.

By repurposing the strategies from books he’d read over his life, Regis manages to gain the allegiance of a barbarian army, take down an impregnable fortress, and bolster the forces of Altina’s border regiment.

And so the year turns to 851—

At the beginning of April, Altina makes her return to the imperial palace of La Branne. This is hardly the time to enjoy the sights and celebrations, however, as both the first and second princes of the Empire are plotting to take the throne.

Altina is fourth in line, meaning she cannot become empress without overcoming them both.

Regis is initially overwhelmed. That is, until he sees through both princes' ploys and cleverly uses them to his advantage. He ultimately secures the cooperation of rising noble Elenore, while First Prince Auguste—or at least, who everyone believes to be Auguste—rescinds his right as next in line to the throne, expressing his desire for Altina to take his place. As a result, Altina is finally established as a prominent candidate to become empress.

On April 23rd, High Britannia, the nation that has exhibited the greatest advancements in industrial technology, issues a declaration of war.

Appearing to have colluded with High Britannia, the Grand Duchy of Varden chooses this opportunity to launch an attack on Fort Volks. Regis's scheme sends them running in a single night, but an archer in the famous mercenary brigade Renard Pendu manages to shoot down the young knight Eric, while Altina's treasured blade—the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*—is broken in combat.

Despite these developments, the border regiment is forced to march west to answer a call for reinforcements. Regis's elder sister makes an appearance along the way, and they entrust the broken sword to her husband (and Regis's brother-in-law) Enzo for repairs.

On May 19th, the Battle of La Frenge takes place. Led by Bargesonne, a lieutenant general valuing tradition above all else, the Empire's Seventh Army forms a closely-knit formation and charges their foe. However, when pitted against High Britannia's newest firearms, the Belgarian Army's attack leads only to catastrophic losses. In the end, the lieutenant general dies in battle, along with half of his troops.

There is no possible way to defeat such weapons—that is what the remnants of the Seventh Army believe, having completely lost the will to go on. And it is to these disheartened men that Regis makes a proposition.

“We should just give up fighting them on land, and attack from the sea instead. High Britannia won't be able to receive supplies if they don't have any

transport ships.”

Meanwhile, Second Prince Latrielle, marshal general of the Belgarian Army, falls victim to a surprise attack from Mercenary King Gilbert. The encounter leaves Latrielle partially blinded, but he conceals his ailment to protect both his troops’ morale and his chances at seizing the throne.

Altina is promptly summoned to a strategy meeting with the prince, during which her border regiment is combined with the remaining western forces to become the Empire’s Fourth Army. Regis, as her strategist, is also promoted to third-grade administrative officer, subsequently becoming Regis d’Aurick.

And so, leaving the capital’s defenses to Latrielle, Altina makes for the sea.

The High Britannian Royal Navy has in its arsenal the Princess-class, a steam-powered ship of the line boasting seventy-four guns. It is fast, sturdy, and unaffected by the wind, with powerful cannons to boot. In contrast, Belgaria’s ships are all old sailing vessels.

However, by using information from the local fishermen and the numerous plans he had read in his books, Regis manages to defy the odds. Serving as admiral proxy, he leads the Western Liberation Fleet to a swift victory, managing to take out the enemy fleet and reclaiming the occupied port.

Preface 1: The Will of a Blacksmith

Imperial Year 851, May 25th, dawn—

Enzo rubbed his aching eyes. He felt strangely spry, overcome with the drowsiness of an all-nighter coupled with the exultation in a job well done.

The light of the morning sun was already streaming in through the small window, and six apprentices were busy preparing the workshop for the day's work. Their shop faced the main road, and Enzo could hear the bustle of passing carts and people.

It was time to open the workshop.

The town of Rouenne was situated half a day's walk west of the Empire's capital. It was home to many craftsmen, be they bakers, needleworkers, carpenters, or—of course—blacksmiths. Their workshops were bundled in the western edge of town, in the atelier district.

While it would normally be better to open shop in a location where competition was scarce, the craftsmen had a reason for gathering in one place. The job of a blacksmith, for one, involved pounding out metal with hammers. The sound resonated even through thick brick walls, and when busy, their work carried on late into the night. For that reason, no one dared to live beside them unless they belonged to the same industry.

In order to avoid excessive competition within industries, each artisan had their own specialty. One might devote themselves to fashioning belts and buckles, another would make flawless hinges, and yet another would excel at riveting. Having them all reside in the same general area also made it possible for craftsmen to rely on one another, meaning there was more work as a whole.

The force unifying them was the Blacksmith Guild, which served two greater purposes. The first was to assess the qualifications of each craftsman.

Most craftsmen took on apprentices—usually their own children or relatives

—either to better distribute their work or to pass down their skills. Enzo currently had six, each of whom desired to one day set up a shop of their own. It was up to the Guild to decide whether or not they were allowed to go independent, however, and each apprentice would be tested to see whether they were worthy of putting the words “Rouenne Blacksmith” on their sign. Incidentally, their mentor’s approval was required to take the test; they weren’t allowed to even attempt it otherwise.

Enzo had trained one previous lot of apprentices, with only two among them managing to pass and move on. The other four instead gave up, either returning home or picking a different trade. Among his current lot, there was one apprentice whom he saw great promise in; the rest were still works in progress.

His star pupil, Lionel, called over. “Morning, boss. About time to open shop.”

“Sounds about right.”

Lionel was pretty spindly for a blacksmith and claimed to have once been an aspiring painter. Enzo himself was well studied in the arts—installing gorgeous ornamentation was all part of the job, after all—and, while he didn’t plan on losing to his apprentice just yet, he could tell that the man had talent.

“That sheet should arrive from the Guild today, but I hear the High Britannian Army’s coming pretty close... Think they can still spare it?”

“They’ll have to, or else.”

The second purpose of the Guild was supplying plate metal, since it was impossible to make good-quality products without high-quality iron. The Guild had a firm grip on its circulation, meaning the craftsmen had little choice but to hear them out, but in exchange they were guaranteed that supply would never run dry and that every sheet would be of acceptable quality. In other words, it was a mutual agreement.

The Empire was presently at war, meaning there was no shortage of weapon and armor orders, but the metal shipments were running behind schedule. The market price was rising by leaps and bounds, and the Guild had no choice but to power through.

Lionel went over to the workshop door, removing the bar laid across it before

using his full body weight to swing it open. *Le forgeron d'Enzo Bardot Smith*—the metal letters glistened in the morning light.

Enzo wrapped a white cloth around the massive sword he had just finished working on; it wasn't a piece that he could allow his other customers to see.

"Already done there, boss?" Lionel asked, busily sweeping the entranceway.

"It's perfect. Our next hurdle's gonna be making sure it gets to her. You know who we're dealing with here, after all."

"Guess you're right. Man, I thought we were all dead when you started speaking to the princess like that."

"Leave off already. My wife gives me enough hell every time I bring up this sword. It's gonna start showing up in my dreams at this rate."

"Haha— Oh, welcome!" Lionel stopped mid-sweep as two new visitors entered the workshop, turning to them with a splendid service smile.

Standing before them was an elderly woman who wore a distinct, hard-to-please expression, accompanied by a single maid. It was the missus of the viscount who lived at the center of town. They had dealt with her a few times before; her orders were usually much too vague, she would always have something to complain about, and she had accumulated her payments on a tab for over a year. She was, to put it nicely, quite a difficult customer to deal with, but they were obligated to hear her out nonetheless.

Enzo turned to the viscountess, feeling his weary back grate in the process. "Good day, ma'am. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Obviously. Why else would I be here?"

"Very well."

"I know that you're a blacksmith, but you can't expect to get by on your smithing skills alone. You need to learn how to treat visitors."

"Certainly... Thank you for the advice," Enzo said, holding back from asking the good madam whether she was specifically here to lecture him.

The viscountess exchanged a look with her maid, who produced a cloth-wrapped article from the basket she was carrying.

“Here...”

Enzo took it, then undid the wrapping to find a pair of sewing scissors.

“I remember these.”

“That’s right,” the viscountess promptly responded. “They fit perfectly in my hand but went dull in no time at all.”

“I see.”

Enzo had entrusted an apprentice to make them a mere half-year ago. He could understand if she had been a tailor, but for a noble lady to have worn them out so quickly suggested that they perhaps weren’t up to snuff. He checked the scissors carefully, looking for any signs of error, but there didn’t seem to be anything wrong with the item itself.

“The blades seem to be in pretty rough shape... Have you been using them to cut anything besides cloth? Leather, perhaps?”

“Of course not!” the viscountess sharply exclaimed, taking Enzo by surprise. In an instant, she had managed to draw the attention of every apprentice in the workshop.

“Hm, I see... I just can’t see how their condition would deteriorate this quickly if you were only cutting cloth.”

“I can assure you that I have *not* been cutting leather. You were responsible for making these scissors, so I demand that you repair them this instant.”

“Yes, our workshop did make them. I wouldn’t mind sharpening the blades for you, but we are rather packed at the moment... Would you mind leaving them with us for a few days?”

“You have *got* to be kidding me. I need them done *now*. Why do you think I came here so early in the morning?”

“I’m sorry, but... we handle our jobs in the order they’re received.”

“To hell with that. I’m sure they’re all jobs from commoners, right?”

“Pardon...?”

“I’m using those scissors for the sake of a viscount house; it’s only good sense

that you should prioritize them.”

As much as Enzo wanted to kick the viscountess out for such remarks, he was already being scolded by his wife for having been rude to someone important. What would she say if she heard that he had turned down a noble lady this time? Endurance was simply part of the job.

Just as he was wondering what to do, Lionel whispered something into his ear.

“...You have a messenger.”

“Gn?”

Enzo glanced out the door to see a soldier in light armor leading along a splendid horse. The green cloth against his shoulder bore a white shield, the insignia of Princess Marie Quatre Argentina.

The soldier bowed before stepping in. Based on his dry skin and sunken eyes, it was clear that he had pushed both himself and his horse almost to breaking point to get here. “I come bearing urgent news from the battlefield. May I have a moment of your time?” he asked in a muddled yet courteous voice, his tone making it clear that he wouldn’t take “*no*” for an answer.

Enzo turned to his other client. “If the viscountess allows it.”

For somewhere situated so close to the capital, it was rare to be faced with the urgency of war. The viscountess recoiled at the sight of this soldier who seemed to embody the battlefield itself.

“G-Go right ahead.”

“Pardon me, Sir Blacksmith. Please read this,” the soldier said, holding out a letter.

Enzo plucked it from his hands and undid the wax seal. It was brief—extremely to the point. Based on the penmanship, it had most likely been written by his brother-in-law, Regis Aurick—no, wait, the newspaper had mentioned that he was Regis *d’*Aurick now.

But the signature belonged to the commander. It summarized the Fourth Army’s current situation and requested the prompt delivery of the princess’s

sword.

“Hm. So we’ll be hand-delivering it after all.”

“A guide should be waiting for you at the designated point. However, while this job would usually require many guards... there weren’t enough horsemen to spare, and it would take much too long to send any foot soldiers.”

“So it seems.”

“Please be aware—you may lose your life on this journey. I myself was chased by High Britannian soldiers on the way here. Our commander made it clear that this is not an order, but a request. She said that you are under no obligation to agree.”

“I see. You saw those High Britannians, did you? Can we use the highway?”

“The highway is out of the question. I believe you would need to take a detour of at least 10 lieue (44 km).”

“Mhm... Okay, that should be doable.”

“So you’ll accept?”

“Back when he placed the order, little Regi— er, *your strategist* warned me that his unit would probably be on the front lines by the time I was done. He wanted to come and pick the blade up after the war was over. How absurd is that? My job was to repair a weapon, and weapons are meant for war.”

“Right.”

“So I said to him: I’ll send it wherever you want. Just give me ten days, then tell me where to go.”

Today marked the end of those ten days.

The soldier reverently bowed his head. “Thank you... That sword is our rallying cry—the symbol of our unit. With it, I’m sure the Empire will triumph.”

Enzo nodded, then glanced over at the viscountess. “I’m sorry, but your scissors will have to be put on hold. I’ll get them back to you by the end of the month, assuming I survive. Or would you rather I keep this lass waiting?”

He rolled up the letter so that only the signature was visible, then held it up

for the viscountess to see.

Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria.

Fourth princess of the Belgarian Empire, and now commander of the unified western forces.

“Eep!?” The viscountess’s eyes shot open wide.

“Sorry it wasn’t a lowly commoner’s request,” he added cynically.

Her face immediately turned bright red; even she wasn’t about to claim that a viscountess’s sewing scissors were more important than a princess’s sword.

“Y-Yes, of course...” she eventually replied, her expression stiff. “What an honor it must be to have received a request from Her Highness. Indeed, it is only natural that you would prioritize her order. So natural, in fact, that there really was no need to ask me. Hohoho...” Despite the haughty words escaping her lips, her voice quavered as she spoke. And then, in the blink of an eye, she declared that she was leaving and hurriedly walked out, dragging her maid along with her.

Enzo stuck out his tongue at the viscountess’s retreating back, then turned to his apprentices.

“C’mon, boys! Pack your bags! We’re headed west!”

Preface 2: The Lion and the Serpent

May 27th—

Owing to the rain that had carried on for three days straight, High Britannia began its offense later than expected. They were lugging along large, heavy cannons, which meant that muddy roads slowed their march considerably.

Thanks to that, the First Army under Latrielle was able to prepare for a siege. They awaited their foe at Fort Boneire, south of the capital—the last fortress to protect a city without walls.

Since the First Army had been bolstered by the remnants of the Seventh and the Third, they now numbered forty thousand and had plenty of cavalry at their disposal. Latrielle had stationed twenty thousand men outside the fortress, while the remaining twenty thousand were holed up inside. He had opted to do this rather than keep their entire army in the fortress as their defenses would serve no purpose should High Britannia simply ignore them and head for the capital. But this way, he was prepared to shoot the enemy in the back the moment they tried to pass through.

The High Britannian Army had appeared that morning not too long ago, and the battle had commenced just before noon. The enemy's cannons, the Type-41 Elswicks, roared to life.

Fort Boneire stood atop a hill, forcing its invaders to scale an incline and allowing the fortress's attacks to span a greater distance. But even then, it seemed that High Britannia's cannons had a slight range advantage in an upfront shoot-out, as their cannon shells managed to strike the stone walls.

Belgaria of course returned fire, and a few shells landed among the enemy formation.

Constructed along the contour of the hill, Fort Boneire stretched from east to west in the shape of a crescent moon. Enemies that came from the front would be mercilessly bombarded by the east and west towers, and while the towers

themselves were rather tough to defend due to their design, they weren't connected to the main structure. In other words, even were the enemy able to take them, they would need to make their way through yet more walls to reach the center.

This fortress was, in essence, three forts supporting one another.

A map had been spread over the conference room table. Germain, Latrielle's staff officer, was busy putting the last few pieces into position.

"It seems this is how they've deployed themselves," he said. "Their cannons and foot soldiers are out front, while their horsemen protect their flanks and rear."

Latrielle nodded. "Hm... I heard that their Oswald was quite the schemer. To think he actually began with a frontal assault."

Also present around the table were nine others, most notably including the elderly commander of the Third Army and a young knight who was rallying the remnants of the Seventh Army. Foot soldiers in heavy armor stood on guard by the wall.

Lieutenant General Buxerou of the Third Army leaned in, his thick beard quivering as cried out, "Commander! We should put our cavalry on the offensive! So long as we attack them from behind, even the latest cannons and rifles are nothing to fear! Let's teach High Britannia a lesson they'll never forget!"

"Our duty is to defend this point..." cautioned Coigniera of the Seventh Army. "There is no need for us to expend ourselves." He was a second-grade combat officer, and while that didn't rank particularly highly in the Seventh Army, their commander Barguesonne along with most of their senior officers had died in battle. Those who remained cowered in the face of the High Britannian Army, leaving him to pick up the pieces.

Buxerou scoffed. "Lost your nerve after a single defeat!?"

"Kh... You're underestimating our foe because you've never fought them head-on. Are you really so eager to send your men to their deaths?"

"Silence!"

With all the troops they had backing them, both were incredibly strong-willed. Gathering them together like this was proving to be a trial and a half, especially given the unspoken problem that Latrielle now faced. His vision was such a haze that he wasn't even sure whether his men were glaring at one another right now; the most he could make out were vague shapes.

Around a week ago, Latrielle had fallen victim to a surprise attack from the Mercenary King Gilbert, coming away with a wound to his brow. The poison on his opponent's blade had since affected his sight, so much so that his left eye was now completely blind. His right was currently on the road to recovery, but the doctor had said that it would only be a few years before he lost vision in that one as well.

Were the troops to find out, it would no doubt cause large-scale unrest. Latrielle would be forced to drop out of the competition for the throne. He couldn't let the news spread.

Germain—his confidant, and the only one who knew his situation—moved the pieces from the map as an excuse to report everything verbally.

"The enemy's formation stretches out horizontally. A fine formation to fire upon us, but perhaps they didn't foresee us going out to counterattack. That said, they have lines of soldiers armed with rifles and shields. If we do leave the fortress to exchange blows, we will suffer great casualties."

"...They have us at a stalemate."

"So it seems, sir. The enemy's cannon fire does reach our walls, but were I to make a comparison, they pose as much threat as a knife stabbing at brick."

"The distance is much too great, after all."

High Britannia's shots lost too much force before they reached the fortress. Were they to stomach the risk and move their cannons closer, however, it would be a very different story. Stone walls were fragile once their bottoms had been hollowed, so even partial destruction would be enough for them to collapse under their own weight.

Latrielle raised a hand to his quibbling subordinates. "That's enough. I understand their intentions."

His men immediately closed their mouths and corrected their posture. The roar of cannon fire could be heard more clearly through the window—shots from both sides.

Latrielle made sure to speak calmly. As the commander, he could not show even the slightest trace of unease lest his men grow anxious.

“High Britannia intends to agitate us with their cannons, inviting us to attack. As things stand, I have no doubts that Fort Boneire’s walls will hold well enough. Should Argentina’s Fourth Army be defeated, only then shall we venture out... but it is much too early to make that call. In the meantime, stay wary of the enemy’s movements and devote your all to defense.”

The young knight Coignière smiled, his suggestion having been accepted.

On the other side, Buxerou grit his teeth, his beard once again shaking as he voiced his displeasure. “Commander, do you doubt our martial prowess!?”

“Not once have I ever doubted the valor of the Third Army. Have I said anything to that effect?”

“Erk... No, not that I recall...”

“As long as the High Britannian Army cannot conquer Fort Boneire, they will remain locked here indefinitely. Eventually, they will have no choice but to split up, take distance, or retreat. And that is the moment we shall launch our counterattack. I have high hopes for you.”

“Yes, sir!” Lieutenant General Buxerou graciously stood and bowed, at which point the others did the same.

And so, the Belgian Army resolved to stay on the defensive...

But the very moment that Oswald Coulthard discerned this was the case, he made his move.

That evening, Germain flew into Latrielle’s room.

“Big trouble!”

“What is it...?”

Latrielle had been resting his eyes, holding a damp cloth over them as he sat partially slouched in his chair. He removed the cloth and allowed it to soak in a pot, having been told to keep his eyes as clean as possible and to cool them should he come down with a fever.

Germain shut the door and saluted. "My apologies, sire. The enemy army has moved. There are refugees headed our way."

"Mn?"

"Presumably from the towns and villages the enemy army encountered along their march."

The people of Belgaria were not accustomed to being invaded; they had always been on the invading side. What's more, High Britannia had managed to defeat both the Second and the Seventh Armies in almost no time at all during their engagements, allowing them to advance much quicker than expected.

As a result, most people were too late to flee. In most cases, such people would be killed and their assets repurposed. Some would even be made into disposable baggage carriers.

"How many?"

"A considerable amount. Over ten thousand, I presume. It seems they were moving slower than the enemy, which is why they only just arrived."

Latrielle paused for a moment. "You mean to say the enemy army has taken our people hostage?"

"No, they're being made to walk toward the fortress. No demands have been made. It looks like they've simply been released."

"Hm... So that's their game."

"Should we open the gates and let them in? It may be dangerous..."

"It's most definitely a trap. But if we keep them shut, we will enrage both the civilians and the soldiers."

"As I thought."

Germain's wisdom was one of the reasons he had been made a staff officer in

the first place; he already realized the danger.

“If we open the gates, then by the time ten thousand tired souls pass through, we’ll have permitted the enemy to charge...” Latrielle mused. “It would be near impossible to close them after that. Even if I were to give the order, our soldiers would not slaughter our own people.”

“Right.”

“It’s also possible there are enemies among the civilians, disguised in Belgianian clothes. Their standing army would never do something so shameful, but... they have hired mercenaries among their ranks, too.”

“Grr... If we let a single High Britannian soldier in, they could seize control over part of our walls. From that point on, we’re like a ship with a hole in its hull; the enemy would come flooding in.”

Latrielle would no doubt be criticized for turning down refugees, but at the same time, it was much too dangerous to accept them. He paused once again, deep in thought, before eventually voicing an idea.

“...If we can work together with the unit stationed outside, we can prevent the enemy from charging us. We’ll open the main gates only partially, allowing us to screen each civilian for weapons. It will be a slow process, though. It might even take all night.”

“Shall I arrange to have it done?”

“And if we take in ten thousand non-combatants, we’ll be hard-pressed for food.”

“C-Certainly... but we should be able to hold for half a month. By then, we’ll know the results of the Fourth Army’s efforts.”

The enemy army would surely stop fixating on the capital if Argentina managed to sever their supply chain. Were they to keep up this siege under those circumstances, they would almost certainly run out of supplies first. But Latrielle had other doubts.

“What actions do we take if they send ten thousand more?”

“Ah!?”

“Perhaps the next ones they send are the wives and children of the men we take in now. We would risk insurrection if we so much as suggested abandoning them. A civil war with ten thousand civilians in these narrow fortress walls—we wouldn’t be able to handle an outside attack then.”

“Mm... So we’d have to accept even more refugees.”

“We have no grasp on how many civilians have become their prisoners of war. Thirty to forty thousand is the point where our supplies are done for.”

“We would barely last two weeks...” Germain groaned.

They had to make a decision.

“Fort Boneire is the capital’s last line of defense. We can’t expose it to danger for a meager ten thousand people... The Empire is home to thirteen million.”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

All of a sudden, the cannons boomed outside the window. Germain turned pale, and in no time at all, there was a messenger tapping on Latrielle’s door.

“Speak!” Latrielle ordered. There was no time to waste opening it.

“The enemy army is firing on our civilians! Lieutenant Buxerou is opening the front gates as we speak!”

“Unbelievable!” Germain shrieked.

Latrielle pressed a hand to his brow. His men had made the first move; they couldn’t ignore Belgian civilians being shot right before his eyes.

“I-It’s not too late,” Germain stammered, his voice quavering. “Give the order not to let them in!”

“...No. It’s much harder to withdraw an outstretched hand than to never offer it at all. I fear the soldiers’ antipathy. Groups move more on feeling than logic. Our only option is to accept the civilians and plan around that.”

“Kh... Understood. Then we’ll check to ensure they don’t have any weapons.”

“Indeed.”

Latrielle rose from his chair, calling to Germain before he could leave the room. “...We’ve lost the initiative, all because I’ve been holed up in my room. I

know I'll cause you trouble, but I must stay at the ready."



“B-But what of your recovery?”

The messenger was still present, so Latrielle brought Germain closer and whispered into his ear. “The poison’s fading... My condition’s a little better. My fever is going down.”

“Are you sure?”

“When we’re this close, I can see your face.”

“Your Highness...”

Latrielle was able to see Germain through his right eye, and while the facial features were still somewhat blurry, his sight was good enough that he could make out his expression. He may not have recovered enough to be able to strike down an oncoming arrow, but he could at least swing a sword now.

But more importantly, he would no longer have to rely on messengers to deliver his orders. This process inevitably led to delays, as they were now witnessing firsthand.

“Hm... I hear this Oswald fellow has a knack for unscrupulous deeds,” Latrielle said. “He’s not going to make this easy, is he?”

“My thoughts exactly. To use captive civilians... He’s as virulent as a poisonous serpent.”

“Though I’m not one to speak. Not after I considered abandoning them...”

“Th-That’s...”

“Don’t worry. You can’t wage wars on ideals.”

Latrielle pushed the door open with his own two hands, returned a salute from the messenger, and then stepped through.

Just you wait, serpent. This time, I’ll take the initiative.

Chapter 1: Today or Tomorrow

June 3rd—

Upon liberating Port Ciennbourg, the Empire's Fourth Army set up camp in the highlands 10 lieue (44 km) to the east, an area covered in grassy fields where the wind was gentle and cool. The sun rose high up into the blue sky dotted with white wisps of cloud. Had they not been in the middle of a raging war, it would have been the perfect place for an afternoon nap.

After replenishing their supplies in the west, the main camp was once again a rather large tent. They had previously discarded their old tent and even their cannons in a battle against time to get from La Frenge to the western coast, during which their main camp had consisted of no more than hemp cloth partitions without so much as a roof.

This new tent was a splendid piece that even came with windows to allow light through. It was guarded by foot soldiers in heavy armor, and inside waited the army's commander, Altina; her strategist, Regis; and the maid, Clarisse, who was busy preparing tea.

"Enjoy."

"Thank you, Ms. Clarisse."

Regis took the teacup offered to him and doused his parched throat. Altina, meanwhile, impatiently tapped her finger against the map on the table.

"Jerome's taking his time..."

"We did ask for a lot. For now, we should just rest; we won't get another chance to anytime soon."

At that, Regis opened the book he'd brought with him. This one was about a young boy who was going through military academy for the second time—not because he was repeating a year, but because some strange power had sent him back in time. It was a tale of adolescence.

All of a sudden, Altina poked her finger into his cheek. “Reading’s good and all, but how about keeping me company sometimes?”

“Hm? Was there something you wanted to talk about?”



“Not that. I mean, you know, every now and again... Just a little talking... kicking back, drinking tea... Where’s the harm in that?”

“The books I’ve read are just about the only things I know how to talk about.”

“That’s fine with me,” Altina responded, her cheeks puffed up. She was being strangely pouty today, yet it didn’t quite seem like she was in a bad mood.

Regis searched through every book that he’d read across his life, searching for something that might explain her curious behavior. It most closely resembled that of a budding young woman hoping to be pampered by her lover, but... that couldn’t be it, surely.

Altina was the fourth princess of the Belgarian Empire, and second in line to the throne, at that. She was also the commander of the Fourth Army, holding the military rank of lieutenant general. Sure, she was only fifteen, but she possessed the ambition to become empress. What’s more, she had earned the support of many soldiers and commoners, as well as the upstart nobility of the south.

To summarize: Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria couldn’t possibly be like any other girl.

Then again, Regis’s self-esteem was notably low. He had happened upon situations that were similar to the books he read, been saved by talented comrades, and been blessed with incredibly good luck that saw his plans through. Not once had he ever thought that he himself was anything special—in fact, he was certain that his incompetence would be proven the moment they ran into a problem that he hadn’t previously read about.

He might have been Altina’s strategist, but it had been Eric who saved her from that money-grubbing inspector. And back in April, when they had visited the palace, he was initially powerless before Latrielle’s devices; the counterattack he had eventually devised was mostly thanks to a hint from Eric, information from Elenore, and Altina’s intuition.

There was also the fact that, when the Seventh Army had gone up against High Britannia’s riflemen with their traditional close-knit formation, Regis had failed to come up with a proposal good enough to change the late commander’s

mind. As a strategist, surely he was worse than second-rate.

All this wasn't even considering the sad reality that he couldn't properly swing a sword nor ride a horse. As a man, what appeal could he possibly have?

In Regis's mind, that was enough to rule out any possibility that Altina was looking at him in such a way. It wasn't even worth consideration. In which case, what did she want?

"...I'd hazard a guess that you have too much time on your hands, and thus want to hear a story. I must admit, though, I don't quite have the skills to be a minstrel," Regis said with a wry smile.

Altina looked at him dubiously. "You're making me sound like some selfish tyrant."

"I think you're safe in that regard. Well, unless you demanded that I read you stories each night and threatened to kill me otherwise."

"What's that supposed to mean!?"

"You've never heard that one? Once upon a time, the king of a far-off land..."

Regis recited a story that he had read once before. He was simply recalling what was written in the book, of course—it wasn't as though he'd ever written a story himself—but he'd read enough to have a general grasp on how to keep her interest. Soon, Altina wasn't the only listener; Clarisse was lending him an ear as well.

They sipped tea, chatted, and got exceedingly invested in the tale until...

"Brigadier General Beilschmidt and Lieutenant General Beaumarchais have arrived," a guard called from beyond the tent entrance. Jerome stepped inside soon after.

Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt was a man whose reputation as a valorous warrior had earned him titles such as "the Black Knight" and "the Hero of Erstein." He was currently serving under Altina, but his skills likely made him one of the most capable fighters in Belgaria. In battle, Regis trusted him over anyone else.

Accompanying him was an orange-haired knight—Lieutenant General

Benjamin Emanuel de Beaumarchais, commanding officer of the Empire's Second Army and eldest son of the Beaumarchais House. His younger brother, Justin Gabriel, was his deputy commander.

Incidentally, the house's third son was Germain, Latrielle's confidant.

Regis had caught a glance of the siblings during the commemoration festival in April, but they hadn't exchanged any words back then. On this encounter, they had already exchanged formalities... but Benjamin's expression was already curled into a scowl.

Under Latrielle's orders, the defeated Second Army had been absorbed by the newly established Fourth Army. As a result, Benjamin was now Altina's subordinate.

Not only was Belgaria a strongly patriarchal society, but Altina was still only fifteen; it was inevitable for a middle-aged male lieutenant general to feel dissatisfied at this decision. And if that wasn't enough, Count Beaumarchais was one of the influential nobles with an estate near the capital, putting the house in Second Prince Latrielle's faction. Fourth Princess Altina was a political enemy.

He surely wouldn't dare to sabotage them during a battle in which the Empire's continued existence was at stake, but he was a man to be wary of nonetheless. *And, thinking about it, he probably sees us the same way,* Regis mused. It wouldn't be strange for him to fear that the princess might use this opportunity to send him to his death for even the slightest advantage in this political game.

Once in the tent, he looked around restlessly.

"....."

"Please, take a seat," Regis said.

Benjamin thought for a moment, then nodded. "Very well." Jerome had already slumped down into the nearest seat as though he was at his own estate, so he didn't want to be the only one still standing.



“Good grief. You really know how to work a man to the bone, Regis! Are you sure you aren’t confusing cavalrymen with caravans!? Oi, Regis!”

“Haha... I’m sorry. It would have taken much too long had we sent foot soldiers.”

All hands were gathered at the center table. Altina was closest to the rear of the tent with Regis to her left, while Jerome was nearest to the entrance with Benjamin on his right.

Meanwhile, Clarisse was standing by the wall, as unmoving as a statue. She laughed and joked around with those she trusted, but in the presence of even a single stranger, she became silent and expressionless.

Noticing that Benjamin seemed nervous, Altina spoke up first. “Good work. How’s everyone looking?” she asked in her usual amiable tone.

In response, Benjamin pursed his lips as though he was working through a difficult math problem. His fists were clenched, and he was staring fixedly at the table.

“.....”

From his point of view, Altina was royalty as well as his commander. However, she was also a fifteen-year-old girl and the representative of an opposing faction. He was so caught up in matters of standing and ulterior motives that he couldn’t even engage in small talk, and a greasy sweat soon dampened his brow.

Jerome shrugged. “The soldiers? They’re all feeling lost as hell after being put on that incomprehensible mission, of course. ‘Fetch as many barrels of lake water as you can,’ she says. What, are you making a pond or something?”

“No, not exactly. I’m pretty sure I already explained what we would be using it for,” Regis replied.

“Hmph,” Jerome snorted. “It sounds like nonsense coming from you. Like some magic spell. You’ll get the inquisition on your back one of these days.”

“It’s just fundamental *sciences naturelles*...”

Altina shot forward. “Oh, while we’re talking about Regis—we were just

getting to the good part. He's a natural at this!"

"N-No... I was just telling a story..."

Jerome stared at him suspiciously. "Oi, Regis? I thought you were some sort of strategist, but now it turns out you were a minstrel all along... No wonder you're such a wimp!"

"I am not trying to be a minstrel. And I know that I'm a wimp."

"I hated that sissy bunch back at the capital. Every time I spotted them in the palace, I was always telling 'em: 'If you're a man, you should be swinging a sword!'"

"Wouldn't you be reprimanded for swinging a sword in the palace?"

"Then start thrusting a spear!"

"I don't think that's the problem here..."

"Hah! My point is, any bloke who seduces women with words instead of actions is a complete lowlife. You got that, trash!?"

"Wait, are you referring to... m-me and the princess!? I'm not seducing anyone!" Regis exclaimed, vehemently shaking his head.

"Fwha—!? I... I haven't been... seduced, right? That's absolutely not what that was. Okay, the story was interesting and all, but... but there was nothing else to it," Altina said, now red to the ears.

On the sidelines, Benjamin's eyes were practically spinning in confusion. The current conversation went against everything he knew. Royalty were meant to be revered, meetings were supposed to be strict, and nobles were meant to speak elegantly.

Jerome prodded a finger against the map on table. Ordinarily, it was supposed to show the area around the camp, but that wasn't quite the case; the one here depicted a completely separate area a short distance to the east.

"Regis. You said the High Britannian Army was going to stop here, right?" Jerome asked. "What makes you think that?"

"I sent the engineering team ahead and had them set something up."

“Like a trap? They’re not rabbits, y’know. Are you trying to stall them there? Digging another hole?”

“Yes, well... the soil around here is too damp and loose for us to dig a hole. It would probably be possible in the granary regions, but they belong to Duke Chautiene who has been raising sheep here for many years, and I wouldn’t want to damage his—”

“Enough! Seriously, Regis, who cares about that!? There are ten thousand enemy soldiers five lieue (22 km) ahead of us! Now, tell me you have some way to get rid of that filth!”

“Don’t worry. I know this situation,” Regis said calmly. He seldom trusted his own wit, instead relying on the knowledge he gained from books, and thankfully he had read of a similar development once before.

“This again?”

“Jorge Jean went into a lot of detail in *The Hero of Canequi Plains*. The author was a natural scientist who used his real-world knowledge to set up the—”

Jerome was giving him a certain look again. “How many times are we going to rely on those books of yours?”

“Hm, well... it’s nothing *too* special... Everyone relies on their own experiences, using the things they’ve heard or the books they’ve read to make their decisions. You can’t make a call on something that you know nothing about, don’t you agree?”

“...Maybe.”

“And when you’re solving a problem, you don’t often put much consideration into *where* you’ve gotten the information. My knowledge is only grounded in books, so I can remember which ones the plans that I recall come from. That’s all there is to it.”

Jerome paused. He was usually quick to write Regis’s opinions off as absurd, but was this time different?

“Hm... Like the relationship between muscles and food, then.”

“Oh, that’s right. The body develops based on the food we eat every day.

However, you don't think of what food you've eaten every time you use your body."

"I get it now. In other words, you're the sort of guy who moves instinctively, then remembers what you ate to let you move like that! What a weirdo!"

Jerome's unpleasant tone caused Regis to panic a little. "Y-Yes, if you want to put it like that... But knowing where your knowledge comes from isn't that—"

"Hah! Forget about it. Just talk about the plan!"

"Wah... This is unfair..."

The exchange didn't sit right with Regis. Why was he being called weird, simply because he was aware of something that others oftentimes weren't?



Krueger, a knight and second-grade combat officer, had worked under Sir Jerome for five years now, having served him since before the Beilschmidt border regiment was even formed. The unit he belonged to had grown more and more since then, eventually becoming the Empire's Fourth Army, but his talent meant he was still among its most capable fighters. It was for this reason that he had become one of Sir Jerome's most trusted knights.

He was a man with short, orderly brown hair, his sharp eyes and the deep scar across his cheek giving him a stern appearance. Though he preferred not to admit it, the scar had come not from a fierce battle, but his wife's kitchenware when she discovered his infidelity.

Krueger considered Abidal-Evra—a fellow second-grade combat officer—his contemporary. The two men were almost the same age and shared similar backgrounds, both commoners knighted in honor of their martial prowess who had since played pivotal roles in their brigade.

And yet, that April, Abidal-Evra had been the one selected to guard Princess Argentina. He had clearly done the job well since he maintained the position from that point onward, accompanying her to Rouenne and then her strategist, Regis, to Hugovie.

Until recently, Eric, the grandchild of garrison head Everard, had served as the

princess's official guard. But following an injury in battle, Abidal-Evra had essentially taken up the role in everything but name.

As for Krueger, while his unit was continuing their contribution to the war effort, his personal accomplishments had been few and far between. His current, agonizingly mundane duty was to guard the sappers—their engineering team.

“Keh... Look how wide the distance between us has grown. How am I supposed to do anything noteworthy out here?”

June 3rd, evening—

Krueger led one hundred knights eastward, and not on a valorous march. He sidestepped High Britannia's supply unit around 20 lieue east of the Fourth Army's main camp, his job being to protect their sappers, who numbered two hundred in all.

They knew the enemy army would march straight to them, and yet, for some reason, they were supposed to be setting up camp. This was all under the order of the strategist, Regis... whose commands Krueger could make neither heads nor tails of. It wasn't as though they were laying a trap or an ambush, and the location did not seem to be particularly special; relatively low hills stretched out in every direction.

As the sun made its way westward, painting the sky in hues of orange, the shadow at Krueger's feet stretched across the damp undergrowth. He let out a deep sigh just as the sapper captain, Ferdinand Stuttgart, arrived.

Ferdinand apparently hailed from western Germania, having earned much praise for his measurements and excavating during the capture of Fort Volks. He was a small man, sporting a mustache and a friendly smile.

“We've just finished up work, Sir Krueger!”

“You have? That was faster than I expected.”

“Yes, that's because the strategist recommended we leave it only half complete.”

“I can never understand what that man is thinking!” Krueger exclaimed, his raised voice earning him a bitter smile from Ferdinand. Meanwhile, the sappers went about collecting their tools, purposely leaving some behind.

“We’re only abandoning the old stuff we don’t need,” Ferdinand explained. “It wouldn’t be much of a disguise if we properly cleaned up.”

“Was that on the strategist’s order, too?”

“He certainly has an eye for the finer details, sir.”

“Hm, well... For now, let’s send out the folks who are carrying the heavier tools. The rest we can carry on our horses and wagons,” Krueger responded, repeating the plan they had previously agreed on.

Ferdinand gave an affirmative nod. He turned around to deliver this message to his team, when out of nowhere—

“The enemy! The enemy is coming!” a lookout yelled, racing in from the west.

“How many troops?” Krueger asked sharply.

“Around thirty! Scouts, from what we’ve seen!”

Scouts were used to run ahead of an army’s main force, usually to look for any potential traps or ambushes. Under normal circumstances, such groups would remain as small as possible so that they could easily hurry back to report anything suspicious, so thirty was quite a sizable number. But perhaps High Britannia had sent more to ensure that their scouts weren’t so easily wiped out by a surprise attack, or maybe they intended to take any civilians they came across as prisoners of war. Those who were captured were usually stripped of their assets and forced to haul supplies, as was common practice in the midst of war.

Ferdinand paled. “The enemy, Sir Krueger! We must hurry!”

“Wait. If we run away now, they’ll see right through our plan. The strategist told us to be careful about that.”

“R-Right. It’s meant to look as though we set up camp here, unaware that the enemy was nearby. We have to look like we were caught off guard...”

“Just stay calm. You’re safe with me.”

“I understand, but... the enemy has Mercenary King Gilbert on their side. I don’t see us surviving an encounter with them.”

Krueger narrowed his eyes, glaring to the west. “Yeah... I guess they do have *him* on their side.”

Mercenary King Gilbert was known for his masterful proficiency with a trident, having honed his skills to the point that he was reportedly undefeatable in battle. But this reputation was the result of more than just his fighting ability—his excellence as a commander had brought his men to victory on many an occasion.

But what if we manage to take him out? Krueger wondered. High Britannia’s supply unit had become such an integral piece in the war that its fate would decide the victor, and since the Mercenary King was leading them, it was safe to say he was a foe who held the Empire’s very future in his hands.

By overpowering him, Krueger could pave Belgaria’s path to victory, and his dream of earning a first-class medal would quickly become a reality. Perhaps he would even be revered as the Hero of La Frengé, just as Sir Jerome had become the Hero of Erstein five years prior. And then, maybe—just maybe—he would ascend from his position as a non-hereditary knight. He could become a baron—a real noble...

Krueger could see the enemy horsemen crossing the west hill. It was the High Britannian Royal Army. These were, of course, mere scouts, but the main force surely wasn’t far behind.

Upon seeing Belgaria’s numbers, the scouts came to a halt. They were armed with the latest firearms, but even then, a battle of thirty against one hundred horsemen and two hundred foot soldiers would surely not end in their favor.

Little did they know that the two hundred Belgian foot soldiers were actually sappers, something that was near impossible to discern based on appearance alone.

The scouts turned back. By holding his ground here, Krueger would surely encounter the enemy’s main force, and there was no way that the proud Mercenary King would shy away if challenged one-on-one. Just as the princess had taken on the Hero Jerome half a year prior, he could picture himself

courageously crossing blades with this formidable foe and coming out triumphant in the end.

“Fufufu...”

“Are we not going to retreat, sir!?” Ferdinand asked, worry seeping into his voice.

No. I'll end this war for you right here, right now. That was what Krueger had wanted to say, but he stopped himself at the last moment. “Tsk... I'm just remembering what that strategist said.”

“Eh? About what?”

“His words were: ‘Don't do anything worthy of merit. Your job is simply to retreat; do not engage them in combat.’ Seriously... I can never understand him.”

“Sure, that ‘don't seek merit’ order was certainly strange, but... he is *the Wizard*, after all.”

Regis's astounding achievements had earned him a moniker among the troops. It was surely no more than a fantastical name, but no ordinary human could have taken Fort Volks, saved the crumbling Seventh Army, or turned the tide of battle against High Britannia's overwhelmingly better equipped navy.

“I'm sure the strategist has something in mind,” Ferdinand said optimistically.

“Let's hope so...”

Now that Krueger thought about it, this was the same strategist who had ordered his troops to open fire while their target was still out of range, readied arrows from too great a distance, and, in the naval battle... purportedly sunk his own ships on purpose. Just the thought made a chill run down his spine.

“The enemy's main forces are in sight!” the lookout cried.

They must have received their scouts' report; High Britannian soldiers equipped with firearms raised a powerful war cry as they charged forward. Mercenary King Gilbert was presumably somewhere among them.

Krueger drew his sword. He knew precisely what order he needed to give.

“All hands... retreat! Hurry!”

The knights turned their backs to the enemy troops, with the remaining sappers hopping aboard carriages and horses. They fled at once, leaving their half-finished campsite behind.

Damn it! Seriously, what was the point in any of this!?

With the sun at their backs, Krueger’s unit crossed two hills to the east. Their enemy was a supply unit half comprising vulnerable transporters; they weren’t going to chase horsemen.

Following a large detour, the knights reunited with the Empire’s Fourth Army at the dead of night.



June 2nd, afternoon—

A lone wagon pressed down a narrow road in the La Frenge highlands, the blacksmith Enzo seated in its loading tray. It was a large, canopied, two-horse wagon that he had borrowed from the Guild. They had been reluctant to lend it to him at first, well aware that he was headed into a war zone, but their tune quickly changed when they learned he was delivering an esteemed sword to Princess Marie Quatre Argentina herself.

In fact, their stance had changed so drastically that the Guildmaster himself came to see Enzo, shouting that a failed delivery would “disgrace all the blacksmiths in Rouenne,” before lending him a finer wagon than he had asked for.

Enzo had, of course, needed to show them the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* to prove he was telling the truth. The Guildmaster had apparently seen the paintings of the treasured blade before, so he was simply elated.

It was a weapon bestowed upon Princess Argentina by the emperor himself, though a previous restoration attempt during an era of peace had reduced the sword to little more than a decoration. Adjustments had been made to reduce its weight as much as possible—perhaps so that it could be used in ceremonies, or so that the emperor at the time could actually carry it—which had ultimately

moved the blade's point of balance and made it near impossible to wield effectively.

Regis had mentioned that there was a painting of the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* in the museum—one from before this tragic restoration. Enzo had burned the image into his mind, then returned the weapon exactly to its former glory. Now, with all sincerity, he could say it was perfect; the hilt of the latest iteration had been made thicker, with a counterweight fixed onto its pommel. This had been done to better distribute the blade's weight, but he couldn't help but wonder—who would possibly be able to wield it now?

He recalled the princess's slender body. Since she was the one who had brought the sword in, it was safe to assume that she would probably still be able to lift it, but he had never seen her fight before. All he could say was that he'd done exactly as ordered. He was certain it would serve as a much better weapon now, though it would require even more strength to wield.

Well, we can get down to the nitty-gritty when we actually see each other.

Enzo glanced over at his toolbox, having brought it on the journey in case any necessary adjustments needed to be made. Sitting beside it was his apprentice Lionel, who was expertly whittling some wood despite the shaking of the wagon.

"Mn? Something up, boss?"

"Hm? Oh, no... I'd planned on leaving you to watch the shop while I was gone, is all."

"I became your apprentice because I was so enamored with your skill. Plus, a job like this comes around once in a lifetime, right, boss? Why wouldn't I want to see it through?"

"The others turned blue when they heard where I was headed."

"You should be thankful you have so many people available to keep house. Looks like our other jobs are going to be completed on time, too," Lionel said. In the end, he was the only one who had opted to accompany Enzo on the delivery.

"I guess so."

No matter how important the princess's work was, Enzo couldn't risk shirking his other clients. As long as his apprentices completed each project up to its final stages, there was enough time before the expected delivery dates for him to return and make any last checks.

"Well, I suppose that won't really matter if you don't survive the journey, eh?" Lionel said with a smile.

"R-Right."

Enzo had noticed before that his apprentice said some terrifying things, but with the most peculiarly calm expression. From time to time, he wondered whether it was a sign of confidence. Or perhaps he was simply trying to find a bright side to their current situation.

"We should reach town soon, right?"

"Yeah. It's a pretty small one, but thankfully large enough to be on the map."

There was a curtain between where Enzo and Lionel were seated in the wagon and the driver's seat, designed to keep the rain from getting in. Enzo reached over and pulled it open just as the driver called out to him.

"So, uh... about that town!"

"Yeah...?"

"It's in ruins!"

"*What!?*"

Since the town was some distance from the larger highway, Enzo had been hoping it had been spared during the enemy advance. But as the wagon slowly rolled through, the harsh reality became clear. The fences set up to keep out beasts had been destroyed in places, and there were corpses by the roadside with bullet holes in their backs.

"So the High Britanni *did* attack..." Enzo groaned.

"They sure do get up to some horrible things," Lionel observed, placing his hands together in front of his chest.

"What do we do!?" the driver asked, clearly panicked.

“...We’ll pass through,” Enzo replied. “Slowly.”

Whenever an invading army attacked a town, their main objective was to plunder, making off with people, goods, and anything else of value. If someone—*anyone*—still remained, there was a high chance that it was the enemy.

As they proceeded with caution, Lionel suddenly pointed outside the carriage. “Someone’s there!”

“Erk!” Enzo hesitated. They desperately needed to avoid any encounters with the enemy, but at the same time, perhaps the person Lionel had spotted was a survivor.

“Should we flee?” the driver asked, looking back at his two passengers. He was a small man with naturally wide eyes—eyes that were opened even wider than usual.

“No. We need to know for sure.”

The wagon began moving slower than before. Enzo, Lionel, and the driver fixed their gazes on the human figure in the distance, leaning closer in an attempt to get a better look.

...It was a mantle caught on a tree, wavering in the wind. Nothing more.

“Jeez... Lionel...”

“I-I’m sorry, boss... Must have been seeing things...”

“Phew... Seriously, don’t scare me like that,” Enzo said with a sigh.

But no sooner had he voiced his relief than the horses brayed and stomped, coming to a very abrupt halt.

“Wha—!?”

“Whoa there!” the driver exclaimed, trying to calm the horses.

Enzo had very nearly been thrown out of the wagon, barely managing to catch himself with both hands. “Wh-What’s going on!?” he shouted, pulling his large body back in.

“Sorry! Something must’ve crossed in front of us!” the driver called out in response.

Something? What, like an animal?

“Ah, my apologies. I didn’t mean to spook them.”

A nearby voice startled them a second time. Someone was standing right beside the halted wagon—an old man wearing a brown robe. He held a carved wooden bear in his hand.



“You dropped this,” he said, handing the small carving over to Lionel. The pronounced wrinkles on his face grew even deeper when he smiled.

“Th-Thanks...” Lionel replied, bowing his head. “And, er... You... Are you from these parts? A survivor, maybe?”

The old man shook his head. “Nay. I arrived not too long back. Since then, I’ve been searching to see if anyone made it...”

Silence fell over the group—a moment of respect for the townsfolk who had perished in the attack.

A short while passed before Enzo finally asked the question on his mind. “So, why did you come here in the first place?”

“I was running short on supplies. Stopped by hoping to buy something and found it like this.”

“That’s... unfortunate.”

“Precisely. War is very unfortunate.”

Enzo crossed his arms in thought, then let out a groan. They didn’t have much in the way of supplies themselves, meaning there wasn’t much they could share with the old man. Since they needed the wagon to move as fast as possible, they hadn’t brought anything that would be considered excess weight.

But would sharing some food really save the old man? What good would one or two days’ worth do when they were out in the middle of nowhere?

They had come from Rouenne in the west, their path running in the opposite direction to the High Britannian Army, so the other towns along that route were hardly in any better condition. Most were looted settlements whose residents had already fled, and while a few safe ones remained, Enzo knew it would take more than two days of walking to reach anywhere that was still inhabited.

“So, what now?” Enzo eventually asked.

“Would you be willing to sell me some food?”

“...Sure.”

Despite his actual thoughts on the matter, Enzo gave in almost immediately;

he was terrible at haggling and couldn't bring himself to lie. But perhaps his true feelings came through in his voice, as the old man gave a bitter smile.

"On second thought, just the sentiment is enough. The fact that you're out here means you must have an objective of some kind, right?"

"You could say that."

"Far be it from me to drag any of you young'uns down. I might end up rotting in these lands, but I've lived a full enough life. I'm satisfied."

While Lionel listened with deep intrigue, the driver was visibly anxious. "Sir, I wouldn't want our food running out," he said.

"But we can't just leave him..." Enzo responded. But no sooner had he said the thought aloud than he remembered the very reason he was there in the first place. "I'm sorry," he said, turning back to the old man, "but we are headed to the battlefield. We're to meet up with our guide not far from here, who will then take us to a certain division of the imperial army. There are no towns within walking distance to the east, you'll have to cross mountains to reach anywhere north, and there are no settlements to the south."

"Yeah, well..." The driver began to speak, but then quickly trailed off.

"For that reason," Enzo continued, "a few days' worth of food will provide little salvation."

The driver groaned. "You've got a point..."

"If abandoning him is our only other option, I'm thinking that even the battlefield would be a welcome improvement. If we hurry, we should have just enough food and water for us all to last the journey."

"All right. Fine," the driver eventually conceded.

If push came to shove, Enzo decided he could just offer their new passenger his share of supplies. After all, he wasn't going to die from a day or two without food.

"You're headed to the battlefield?" the old man asked.

"Yes, on a very important errand."

“I see, I see... I may be better off with you there. I can’t imagine my odds of surviving will be any smaller than they are here, at least.”

“With any luck, we’ll meet up with the imperial army. I’m sure they’ll have some food and water to spare.”

The old man offered a deep, appreciative nod, then quickly looked up. “Well, what a splendid turn of events!”

“...Pardon?”

“You’re a true gentleman. I must say, I’ve taken quite a liking to you!”

“Well, uh... thanks, I guess.”

“I’m just an old geezer from the capital but, please, if you would be so kind as to bring me along with you...”

“I’m a blacksmith from Rouenne. This is my apprentice.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name’s Lionel. From sewing needles to plate armor—whatever you need, we can provide.” The apprentice’s relaxed words despite their current situation earned him a chuckle from the old man.

“Lionel, clear some space,” Enzo said, pointing to a cluttered area inside the wagon.

“Right away. Though, man, this stuff is heavy... We might want to tie it down, too. Just give me a second.”

“Sorry for all the trouble,” the old man apologized, climbing into the wagon. Enzo’s eye caught something hidden under his robe, hanging from his left hip.

“You brought a sword...?”

“Of course. It’s dangerous to travel unarmed. If you’re anxious about it, I don’t mind leaving it with you.”

“Oh, no. Given my line of work, swords tend to grab my interest.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but it’s nothing special... Just a cheap one I picked up who-knows-where.”

The old man pulled his robe aside to reveal the weapon. As he had said, it was a common, mass-produced model—an exceedingly normal longsword by all

accounts.

After making some space, Lionel urged the old man toward the newly cleared area on the floor. “My apologies. I’ve done what I can, but I can’t imagine you’ll find it very comfortable.”

The old man gave a wry smile. “Compared to lying on the dirt, I’m sure it’ll feel like a cloud.”

“Also, I have to ask... Would you let me sharpen that sword of yours? I have to keep busy or else my skills start to decay.”

“Hm? Of course, that shouldn’t be an issue...” the old man replied, looking over at Enzo as if making sure this was okay with him as well.

“You’re welcome to leave your sword with my apprentice,” Enzo quickly chimed in. “He does pretty decent work; I’d say he might even be able to go independent next year.”

“Oh, I definitely couldn’t do that,” Lionel responded, already assembling his sharpening tools. “There’s still so much I need to study. I want to learn as much as I can from the boss while I’ve got the chance.”

“If you’re going to sharpen it, at least wait until our next rest stop,” Enzo cautioned him.

Meanwhile, the old man entrusted his back to a wooden box, letting out a relieved sigh. “Feh... Praise be to the Lord, and to you all.”

“It definitely must have been His will that led us to meet...” Enzo agreed. “I only did what came naturally to me.”

The driver shook the reins, and the wagon slowly began to move once more.



June 3rd, night—

A plethora of stars twinkled in the sky overhead. The day had almost come to an end.

Since they had resupplied, the Fourth Army’s camp had improved

considerably. The commander and her senior officers could now sleep in large, luxurious tents, while the regular soldiers were given ones that were a lot simpler in design but still protected them from the elements.

Regis had seen the rudimentary bed in the large center tent where Altina and her maid, Clarisse, would sleep. Given that he was now a senior officer himself, a tent had been prepared for him just next door... yet he instead opted to sleep in his carriage, which had since been disconnected from its horses.

It was a beautiful white box-shaped carriage, wide enough to accommodate six people with the seats facing one another. Its window was made of glass, which was considered a luxury item, while the wheel axles were fixed onto leaf springs. Indeed, this was the finest carriage that one could expect at the time, and one that was certainly not within the border regiment's budget. Elenore, a noble from the south, had sent it to Regis personally.

The compartment was set up as a moving command room with a folding table, which Regis had pulled out and spread numerous documents over. The flame of an oil lamp wavered from its fixture on the wall.

Tap. Tap.

There was a knock on the door.

"Mn?" Regis raised his head from the stack of papers and looked out the window. The highlands were almost pitch-black, barely lit by the stars above. The only thing he could see was his own face reflected back in the glass.

Whoever it was, Regis was sure that it couldn't be anyone dangerous; it would have been strange for anyone who meant him harm to knock first. He gripped the inner knob and pushed the door open.

The lamp quickly illuminated his visitor. Her blazing hair seemed to glisten even under the dim orange light, and with her porcelain-white skin and ruby-colored eyes, she truly was a sight to behold.

"....."

"Do you have a moment, Regis?"

It was Altina. There was a smile on her face, but he could hear the

nervousness in her voice.

Does she want to consult me on something?

“Yes, of course...” Regis replied, starting to bunch up his papers.

Something in particular was making him feel peculiarly unsettled. It was late at night, to be sure, but it wasn’t too surprising for a commander to consult her strategist the day before an operation. Her appearance, however, lingered in his mind. Cut out from the darkness behind her, she carried a charm unlike anything he had witnessed during the day. A peculiar scent seemed to follow her, too—one that could have easily belonged to a fairy tale. For a moment, Regis had to wonder whether this was all a dream.

Altina stepped inside, sitting down across from where he had been seated just moments ago. “Thank you for all your hard work. I see you haven’t slept yet.”

“...I’ll probably be up all night.”

“Have you not finished preparing for tomorrow?”

“Quite the contrary—with any hope, the plan is already being enacted. Sir Jerome should be taking care of everything that needs to be done. The sappers have returned, and our reconnaissance shows that the enemy has set up camp exactly where we anticipated.”

“Do you think we can win?”

“Allow me to put it this way—if we fail to defeat the enemy’s supply unit under the current circumstances, then I’d have to suspect they have a *real* wizard in their ranks.”

“You sound very confident.”

“Well, actually—”

“I know, I know. It’s not that you’re confident, you just *know* things,” Altina said with a chuckle.

While Regis awkwardly scratched his head, the princess picked up one of the documents he had been going through and examined it carefully. It was a map of the region, stretching from Port Ciennbourg in the west to La Frenge in the east.

“...Is something wrong?” Regis asked.

“I know I always struggle to understand the more complicated parts of your plans, but... there’s something in particular that’s been bugging me...”

“Oh?”

“...I’ve been wondering—did you predict that High Britannia’s supply unit would leave the port before we could reclaim it?”

For once, it seemed that Altina was choosing her words carefully. Regis kept silent, allowing her to continue.

“You had Jerome and his men stationed nearby. Why didn’t you have them attack when they saw the enemy leaving? I heard about the order you gave.”

“...Right.”

“You could have, for instance, blocked the supply unit from leaving the town. Then we could have gotten our warships to bombard them. Under those conditions, even the Mercenary King would be forced to surrender. I’m sure you’d considered that already, of course, since you’re so much more capable than I am at these kinds of things, but... I wanted to ask what you had in mind.”

She didn’t seem to be doubting his competency. Instead, her tone was brimming with curiosity, like an eager student speaking to their professor. *It’s dangerous to place so much trust in your subordinates...* Regis thought. But for now, he decided it might be best to simply appreciate her faith in him.

“Hm... I can’t say it too loudly.”

“It’s okay. There wasn’t anyone around when I arrived, and I would’ve noticed if someone approached since then.”

That much was true—Altina’s ears were as sharp as a dog’s, and her night vision was excellent.

“...Right. In that case, I’ll tell you what’s been going through my mind... Be warned, though—it’s nothing pleasant to listen to, and should others learn the truth, it could be a cause for conflict. That’s why you mustn’t tell anyone, no matter how much you trust them.”

“O-Okay.” Altina meekly nodded.

Regis spoke in a hushed voice. “To be blunt... I couldn’t trust the Second Army.”

“You mean their fighting strength?”

“...No. That’s always important to consider, of course, but...” Regis hesitated for a moment, but he had already said too much to stop now. He steeled himself, preparing for the worst. “Who’s to say the Second Army isn’t colluding with High Britannia?”

Altina said nothing in response; her mouth simply dropped open in shock.

“Sir Jerome and the knights of the border regiment are well disciplined, so I was certain they wouldn’t let their guards down when they met up with the Second Army. As such, even were the Second Army to reveal themselves as turncoats, I doubt our forces would have been in any real danger. You would have remained safe, so... I decided to leave things to them.”

“I see.”

“However, things become a little more problematic in the midst of a war. Should they decide to betray us during an engagement with the enemy, we would suffer a far greater number of casualties.”

“...But of course.”

“Just because we come from the same country, there’s no guarantee they will always remain our allies.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that sooner?”

“You’re much too upfront. I was worried that you wouldn’t be able to hide your cautiousness, which would only worsen your relationship with the Second Army. As it currently stands, many are quite displeased that they weren’t given a say in your appointment as commander.”

“Benjamin did have that strange look on his face...”

“They suspect that their new commander might betray them—or rather, use them as a stepping stone to better her own position.”

“I’d never do something so vile!”

“...As malicious as it sounds, if we *do* ever end up in a situation that requires us to sacrifice, say, half of the Fourth Army, I would prioritize saving the soldiers who have been with us since our border regiment days. Otherwise, they would most definitely revolt.”

“Urgh... I... I get that.”

The Beilschmidt border regiment had been reorganized into the Empire’s Fourth Army, but in the process, they had forcibly absorbed the Second Army with little room for compromise. And since Altina was the commander, her own unit had become its central core.

Those who had followed her lead for so long no doubt expected preferential treatment; anything less would be considered unfair, and unfairness was a powerful driving force, especially when there were lives on the line. Jealousy and fear would quickly turn to righteous indignation, which would in turn lead to impulsive and destructive behavior.

“Whenever we take in new troops, it is crucial to ensure that those already in our service don’t feel neglected. Too big of a distinction, however, hinders those new troops from adapting to the unit. And when I considered that balance... Altina, I didn’t want you to be any more antsy than was necessary.”

“You may be right, Regis. Had the thought occurred to me that they could betray us, it might have come out in my attitude when I met with them.”

“Huh...” Regis mumbled, impressed. *That’s a bit of a surprise.*

Altina tilted her head. “What’s up?”

“I was just thinking... You’ve really grown.”

“Y-You think so? Where? What part of me?” Altina asked, her cheeks flushed. She bashfully brushed her hair aside and placed a hand against her chest.

Regis paused for a moment, thinking hard about his answer. “Had we spoken about this not too long ago, you would have most likely gotten angry and shouted something along the lines of, ‘I absolutely could have hidden my emotions!’”

“Erk...”

“If you had been this mature back at Fort Sierck... I wonder... Perhaps you could have bettered your relationship with Sir Jerome through discussion, rather than challenging him to a duel.”

Her present situation was somewhat similar to when she had first been appointed. Of course, she was only in her current predicament because she had won the duel against Sir Jerome, but... had she known how to negotiate and win people over, perhaps that might have been a better solution.

Altina tapered her lips. “Th-That’s completely untrue! The actions I took back then were absolutely necessary! I’ve always been aware of what I can and can’t do. Never have I ever put up a childish strong front.”

“Are you sure? If Sir Jerome had requested that the duel instead be a jousting match, what would you have done then?”

“Eh? Err, well... I-I knew he wasn’t the sort of guy to do something like that. I just knew!”

“I see, I see... You really have come a long way. The old Altina would have argued that she could’ve beaten him regardless.”

“Grr...” Tears were welling up in Altina’s eyes.

Seeing the princess’s reaction, Regis wondered whether he had gone a little too far. He gave her a bitter smile. “Don’t worry about it too much. You’re still only fifteen. Embracing this growth is the only way you can make it as an empress.”

“Does that mean I’m still not good enough yet? ...What if everything turns out to be too much for me?”

“We all have room to better ourselves. I’m sure your journey will teach you many things.”

“...Yeah.”

“I know it’s unfortunate, but one thing in particular that you’ll need to learn as a ruler is how to doubt people.”

“Don’t worry. I’m already prepared for that. I could have spent my days reading poetry books, staring wistfully out the window of my estate. But

instead, this is the path I chose.”

“I suppose so.”

Altina was a woman born into royalty, meaning she could have very easily spent her days in peace. But she had abandoned that life to follow her ambition, subsequently marching onto the battlefield. Any undue concerns would only be a hindrance to her.

At that, the princess pulled the conversation back on track. “So, the reason Jerome didn’t engage High Britannia’s supply unit in Ciennbourg was because you couldn’t trust the Second Army. Is that right?”

“Yes. I also wasn’t sure they could win.”

“But the enemy only numbered about ten thousand, right? And only half of those were actual combatants.”

“Yes, but consider this—the Seventh Army was composed entirely of soldiers and had twenty thousand men at their disposal. Even then, they were still defeated by ten thousand High Britannian troops.”

“I see. We only have sixteen thousand, and a lot of them are injured.”

“I’m sure the Seventh Army drilled their soldiers harder, too... My point is, Sir Jerome would have struggled to take them down. Plus, a victory alone wouldn’t have necessarily been enough.”

“Really? What do you mean?”

“...When this is over, we have to win our war against Prince Latrielle. We wouldn’t want to lose any of the forces backing us.”

Altina frowned. “Isn’t that something for us to consider once the current emperor has passed away?”

“As Professor Villoresi says in *The Walls of Tipoli*, ‘He who cannot see a thousand years ahead should have no say in the development of a nation.’ A ruler must consider the future as carefully as they do the present.”

“But if we lose here in the present, there won’t *be* a future.”

“...That may be so, but you need to consider them both equally. Ceasing to

think beyond the now is a right permitted only to those who can afford to work in the moment; such indolence from a nation's ruler would mean devastation down the line. And there are plenty who will need to live in that era of ruin. The nation bears responsibility for its future people as well."

"Wah... A thousand years later?"

"It's more of a metaphor. When you're thinking up a solution to an issue, you should consider whether it might cause problems a thousand years later. Of course, that doesn't mean you should neglect the potential consequences a day, a year, or even a hundred years down the line, either."

"What if we reach a situation where we have to choose between the present and the future?"

"You should avoid sacrificing either. There was another line in the book that went, 'If given the option to drink poison today or tomorrow, he who chooses either option is not suited to rule.'"

"Is that really how it works?"

"The most common answer would be to drink the poison tomorrow, since something could happen in the meantime that provides you a route of escape. As a result, you place your hope in that."

"That sounds reasonable."

"But if a luck-reliant gambler or a wide-eyed maiden with her head in the clouds ran a country, what would become of their people? There are no miracles in the real world. The metaphorical prince atop his white steed never comes, so the nation would be plunged into ruin."

Altina gave an understanding nod. "A ruler should never hope for a miracle."

"If you were offered the poison... what would you answer?"

In his book, Professor Villoresi had gone on to say: *"The one who picks the third answer, refusing to drink the poison entirely, is the least suited of them all, for he stays well away from the unfavorable and never looks hardship in the eye. He is an imbecile who does not even search for a resolution."*

This conversation was ultimately little more than small talk, but Regis could

feel the tension growing in his chest as he awaited Altina's answer.

She responded almost at once, puffing out her chest with pride. "Well, I'd beat down the guy trying to get me to drink his bloody poison!"

At first, Regis was taken aback. But then, he chuckled. "Hahahaha... I see. Yeah, that definitely sounds like you."

"Wh-What? Did I say something funny?"

"No... Well, I mean, yes, it was funny. But not a wrong answer, in my opinion."

Altina had found her solution by tackling the issue head-on. Her mindset was quite admirable, and while there was still a lot she needed to learn, that wasn't as much of a concern to Regis; he was happy to assist her by coming up with any plans they needed himself. Despite his lack of confidence, he knew his responsibility. He had known it since the very moment he took on the mantle of strategist.

"Ah, for crying out loud. Seriously, what's so funny?" Altina groaned.

"I'm sure the first emperor thought the same way when he founded Belgaria. Each era has its own solutions, but for now, I think tonight's plan should complement that mindset quite nicely."

"Right! What matters most is that we stop High Britannia's supply unit. When and where we do it isn't important, nor does it matter that we're up against the Mercenary King!" Altina boldly declared, standing from her seat.

Regis's eyes shifted to the clock on the carriage wall. "If all goes well, the attack should happen four hours from now. You should get some sleep."

"What about you?"

"I need to prepare for what comes after the battle. Oh, no need to worry about me, though—I'll be asleep by noon."

"Because you know we're going to win?"

Regis smiled at Altina, but did not answer. A wide grin spread across her lips, her face beaming like a radiant gemstone, and then she swung open the door.

"See you soon, Regis!"

“Yeah. We’re still at camp and all, but... be careful.”

“I know!”

At that, she nimbly faded away into the darkness of the night. Regis peered through the window from inside his carriage, but before the door had even closed, she was already nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 2: The Battle of West La Frenge

“Oh, there you are!”

Franziska reached for the branch of a bowing tree and nimbly started clambering her way up. Her pale thighs, exposed as she climbed, were tinted scarlet under the westering sun.

“I’m back, boss!”

Gilbert noticed her in his peripheral vision but offered no particular response. He was sitting atop a thick bough, gazing out into the distance.

The bough swayed as Franziska came up beside him, leaning against his shoulder. “Hmhmhm...” she chuckled.

“...Personal space.”



“Oh, come on! What does that matter!? Your cute little sister is here! You could at least crack a smile!”

“Where’s this ‘cute little sister’ you’re referring to?”

“Here! Right here! *I’m* your cute little sister, boss!”

“How annoying...” Gilbert responded, practically spitting out the words.

But Franziska was carelessly humming a tune like she hadn’t heard him at all. She turned her gaze to the horizon her brother was looking out over, but quickly found that she had to hold a hand over her eyes to block the harsh sunlight. “Mn... So, where are you looking?”

“Nowhere in particular... But there’s a terrible stench coming from over there.”

“There? From the west? Oswald’s fighting the prince in the east, right?”

“A dangerous foe, yes. But there’s something different about this one.”

“Hm... The west would mean... the Second Army?”

“No. Not anymore.” Gilbert glared at Franziska, making little to no effort to conceal his irritation, but this only made her break into an enraptured smile.

“Wow, even a knight would shrink back from that look! I’m really feeling it now.”

“Silence, fool. The Fourth Princess you failed to eliminate is here. She has taken in the Second Army, her troops now numbering sixteen thousand... including Black Knight Jerome.”

Franziska puffed out her cheeks. “Huh. Seriously? Isn’t she from the northeast, though? What’s she doing in the west?”

“If that wasn’t bad enough, the Queen’s Navy has been crushed.”

“Okay, now that part’s got nothing to do with me!”

“Based on the report from our spy, her strategist, Regis d’Aurick, was serving as admiral proxy. That notorious man who was rumored to have taken Fort Volks—he’s the one Oswald was wary about. That’s why he hired us to slow him down.”

Franziska's eyes darted all over. She had attacked Fort Volks along with Varden's forces, her duty having been to lock down the Fourth Princess for as long as possible, but she hadn't managed to keep her for even a day.

"Um... Er... A-Ahahaha..."

"Your blunder allowed them to hinder the pursuit of the Seventh Army in the Battle of La Frenge. And the war has taken a harsh turn since the supply ships were crushed at sea. High Britannia continues its advance, but they can only last as long as they have ammunition. If they fail to take Verseilles with what they have on hand, including the supplies we carry, then... all will be lost."

Franziska was beginning to look ill. She had broken into a cold sweat.

"Hah..." Gilbert sighed. "Had I known how dangerous he was, I would have gone to Fort Volks personally. Looks like Jessica's intel missed the mark by a long shot."

"Sis would be pretty upset if she heard you say that."

"In this world, only the winners survive; effort and standing have nothing to do with it. If you don't want to die, get results. You may be my sister, but the next time you fail, I'm cutting you off."

"Erk... Don't worry! Of course I'm going to win next time!"

"That's what I'm counting on."

At that, Gilbert's eyes flitted back to the west. Franziska wiped her brow with a sigh.

Another voice soon came from the base of the tree—a high-pitched female one. "Gilly? Franny? Dinner's ready!"

Looking up and waving from below was a child who couldn't have been older than ten. She was the third sister, going by Martina. She looked considerably small from so high up, but that also would have been the case on the ground; height-wise, she barely even reached Gilbert's waist.

Franziska broke into a smile. "Meheh. Good girl, that Martina!"

"...Too unreliable on the front line. She's on cooking duty for now. But it's never too early to get battlefield experience."

“Er, boss? I’m saying that Martina is cute. What did you think I meant?”

“No need to discuss such a trifling detail.”

“It’s pretty important to me!”

Gilbert lifted himself up ever so slightly before leaping from the bough, the wind roaring in his ears on the way down. His sudden absence caused the bough to spring back up, very nearly flinging Franziska into the air.

“Hyah!? W-Wait for me, boss!” She was as nimble as a cat, but this was too great of a height for even her to jump from without preparation. She hurried back to the trunk, climbing down with haste.

No sooner had Gilbert touched the ground than Martina latched onto him.
“Gilly! Dinner!”

“Right...”

She began climbing up his body as though he were a tree himself—not that he particularly minded. He allowed her to swing about and play as he returned to the camp.

The High Britannian supply unit he had been entrusted with numbered ten thousand in total. Of those, five thousand were professional soldiers there to guard the convoy, and another three hundred were elites he had brought from the mercenary brigade Renard Pendu.

When they arrived, the mercenaries immediately flocked to him.

“Here, take a seat, chief!”

“Ah, chief! Over here!”

“Wait, ain’t it our unit’s turn today!?”

“Oi, quit pushing me. I’ll slaughter you!”

“Ahyahyaha! Go on, then. I dare you!”

They were exuding the same air as always, coming off as a gathering of ruffians.

Gilbert let out another sigh. “Nuisances... I knew it. I really need to break up the brigade.”

The men suddenly fell silent, but only for a brief moment. Soon enough —“Bwahahahahah!”—they all burst into laughter.

“C’mon over, chief! The best cut’s done grilling! We’ve got deer today! Venison! Just removed the horns!”

“How about you guys listen to me...?”

Under normal circumstances, there would not have been time to set up a stove. A camp was little more than a bonfire, and with such weak flames, it was impossible to make anything too complex.

Today, however, they had managed to steal a camp set up by the imperial army. It came with a serviceable stove, and the men were in high spirits over the large chunks of meat they could roast and the soups they could stew in their pots.

Despite their current behavior, Gilbert knew that the events a couple days prior had put the soldiers on edge. As their leader, he decided it necessary to offer them at least a brief respite, cracking open a wine casket from the supplies. He couldn’t blame them for being troubled, after all—from the port, they had witnessed the battle that had taken place in the bay firsthand.

It had seemed almost certain that High Britannia would come out victorious, but even so, the supply unit were prepared to depart the instant they saw any worrying signs. And then, under the watchful eyes of the soldiers... a High Britannian ship of the line had been caught up in an explosion greater than anything they had ever seen before.

In that very moment, Gilbert had known that the crews aboard the other ships would lose their will to fight. His own men had been understandably shocked as well. Bows and spears could be countered, but this had been a burst like a volcanic eruption—a force of nature that no man would ever be able to oppose.

Time and alcohol—those were the only cures for the profound terror they were faced with.

It hadn’t been long after the supply unit’s departure from the port town that their scouts spotted an enemy unit setting up camp. These foes proved to be

cowards, fleeing without ever crossing blades, and there was nothing lost in using the preparations they had left behind.

After a good drink and a nice meal, both the soldiers and supply carriers appeared to have regained their spirits to quite a degree. In fact, the mercenaries were now even rowdier, their voices perhaps thirty percent louder than usual.

As far as Gilbert was concerned, they were acting *too* energetic. He arbitrarily took an empty seat, feeling rather fed up, at which point Martina sat down to his right. In no time at all, there was a heaping plate of meat thrust before him. Only then did Franziska finally catch up, completely winded.

“Heeey! Boss’s side belongs to me, remember!?” she exclaimed, barging in and grabbing his left arm.

Gilbert sighed. “*Personal space...* Your body temperatures are too high, the both of you. It’s irritating.”

“No way!” Franziska and Martina cried in unison.

In the end, it didn’t matter where he sat; the mercenaries would bring their own plates over and gather in a circle around him regardless. They would selfishly include him in their conversations on just about anything they could think of.

“Listen to this, chief! My wife gave birth back home!”

“Good for you. A toast.”

The mercenaries roared, clanging their cups of wood and iron together in a fervent cheer.

“Chief! My old ma went and croaked, but she never gave a penny to church. You think she can still make it into heaven?”

“Don’t worry about it. If she’s in hell, I’m sure you’ll see her soon enough. Make it up to her then. Well, a toast to heaven.”

They gave another shout and toasted again.

“Chief! My wife gave birth, too! It’s a boy!”

“Wonderful. A toast.”

“Thing is... I haven’t seen her in two years!”

“I see. Then he won’t have your ugly mug. A toast.”

The men cheered in a mixture of despair and desperation.

Gilbert looked around. “Where’s Jessica?”

“Still praying...” Franziska responded, glancing toward the tent currently being used by their eldest sister. It was fairly large and removed from all the clamor.

Jessica was a magician whose spells served many purposes. They granted power to her comrades. They healed wounds. They read the weather using the flow of the stars. Or at least, the men of the brigade believed they did such things. And while she saw these comrades as family, she could hardly stand the noise. At times, she would hole up and even refuse to eat.

The sinking sun added an orange fringe to the western hills, and as time passed, it looked as though half the sky had been set ablaze. One only had to shift their gaze toward the encroaching dark of night to see that the first stars had already begun to shine.



June 3rd, night—

Hooves beat the ground, kicking against the grassy plains and raising a cloud of dust as horsemen in black-painted armor closed in on the enemy camp.

It was Belgaria’s Black Knight Brigade, led by the renowned Black Knight himself, Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt. He was fully clad in black plate armor, as his epithet suggested, and brandished his prized lance, *Les Cheveux d’une Dame*. The horse he rode was black as well, fitted with armor to protect it from bullets and arrows.

This was an era where horses were an outrageously valuable commodity. A well-trained warhorse, for example, was treasured so highly that most soldiers could save up over their entire careers and still not be able to afford one. It was for this reason that they were rarely targeted in close-quarters combat;

regardless of the battle's purpose, any soldier who managed to defeat a knight and steal his warhorse would have obtained a life-changing fortune.

Indeed, no matter how strong the foe they were up against, no one would intentionally squander the prospect of potential riches. A warhorse's armor was only meant to protect it from unintentional shots, but how effective this would be against High Britannia's latest rifles was yet to be seen.

A guide with good eyes and a white banner took the lead, and a moment later, he raised a hand. A campfire could be seen flickering beneath the stars; the enemy was close.

"Hmph... Time to teach them a lesson!"

The beating hooves naturally gave away their approach. Explosive bursts rose from High Britannia's camp—the roars of their new rifles. The camp was still too far away for these shots to be a major threat, but a few stray bullets still hit their targets, knocking those struck in unfortunate places from their horses.

Sure, the horsemen were overwhelmingly faster than foot soldiers, but there was little that could be done when they were being so one-sidedly fired upon. The specs of the enemy's guns were simply too great.

Once they had amply closed the distance, Jerome finally gave the order.

"Fire!"

Rather than blowing into a bugle, Krueger, who rode beside him, signaled the order with a gunshot. Belgaria's guns were front-loaded and took quite some time to reload, so as soon as one shot was fired, the weapon was shoved into a bag hung from the saddle and another loaded one was pulled out. This tactic was intended to make use of the Second Army's surplus of guns.

The Black Knight Brigade now numbered four hundred, having lost a hundred men a few days before in the battle of La Frenge. Their shots were unreliable on horseback, but they were sure to accomplish something with four muskets per horseman.

Soon, it wasn't only bullets coming from the enemy camp—flaming arrows were flying toward them as well. Such meager attacks weren't enough to spook a warhorse, but in no time at all, flames had started to spread along the ground.

Jerome clicked his tongue. “They’ve spread oil!”

This had presumably been done under the order of the Mercenary King; High Britannia’s soldiers weren’t well accustomed to war, and it would require a skilled hand to do something as petty as splashing oil in preparation for a night raid.

It appeared that not much oil had actually been used, so the flames served no real purpose other than to provide light—but that was exactly the problem.

“General, we’re in plain sight!” Krueger yelled, his voice stiff. The night raid had lost its advantage.

Once again, Jerome barked an order. “All right! Retreat!”

This time, in response to the command, Abidal-Evra and his direct subordinates sounded a bugle.

Cavalry were unable to come to a sudden halt, nor could they abruptly turn the other way. They instead began heading to the right, starting with those in the lead, turning their shielded left sides to the enemy as they devoted their all to getting away.

They had preserved their horses’ stamina precisely for this moment, and they broke from their foe at the speed of the wind. Soon enough, the gunshots had faded into the distance.

Jerome tugged on his horse’s reins to slow it down as Abidal-Evra came close.

“General, we have a few injuries.”

While Jerome’s current position listed him as head of the Fourth Army’s Black Knight Brigade, those who had spent years serving under him were used to calling him “General.” This was rarely a cause for confusion, however, as their current commander was often referred to as “Princess,” instead.

“Let them rest,” Jerome ordered. “They can take their time. Those who are unharmed, hurry back to base camp. We’re preparing for the next one.”

“Yes, sir!”

A white shape suddenly caught his eye, moving across the dark hill. It was a carriage.

“There!”

Jerome signaled for those behind to take care not to crash into those in front. The braying horses and Abidal-Evra’s bugle told them to decelerate.

Once the Black Knight Brigade had slowed considerably, it passed by several horse-drawn carriages, each piled high with barrels. It was the sappers. He could vaguely make out their salutes in the dark, and while he wasn’t sure whether they could see him in return, Jerome tentatively reciprocated.

“Are those really going to be useful...?” he muttered.

Abidal-Evra tilted his head, “Who knows? However, if we raided the enemy without a plan, even a cavalry charge would suffer considerable casualties. We’ve already lost a few riders just from exchanging shots at a distance in the dark.”

They had launched a surprise attack during the Battle of La Frenge and still ended up losing a hundred horsemen. High Britannia’s guns were far too dangerous to face head-on.

Jerome spurred his horse. “War is going to be completely different from here on out.”

“Regrettably so,” Abidal-Evra responded, his voice quavering.

Before these new guns had entered the fray, knights were just about peerless on the battlefield. They wore armor that neither spears nor arrows could pierce, raced faster than anyone could flee, and carried sizable lances that allowed them to safely and reliably butcher their foes from horseback.

No matter how dire a situation the foot soldiers were in, the cavalry alone had often been enough to overturn the results of a battle. But now, an infantryman without experience, armor, or an expensive horse could kill a knight with the simple pull of a trigger. And even though it was nighttime, the hail of gunfire had still managed to halt their advance, with traces of oil and a few sparks clearing away the darkness all too easily.

Can we really fight off the supply unit?

It wasn’t only Jerome—many knights surely shared his doubts. But the

operation had already begun. For now, they were to carry out their roles and ask questions later.



The Fourth Army's main camp resided a thirty-minute gallop away, not too far from the enemy's campsite. Even though it was for the express purpose of their plan, they really had gone all out with their battle formation—bonfires illuminated the surrounding area, while foot soldiers clad in heavy armor watched every direction. Horses were given time to rest inside while the guns they carried were loaded for the next attack, and the carriages coming in were stacked high with barrels before being sent right on their way.

When the Black Knight Brigade returned, the stablehands and gun-tenders raced over, with each knight scrambling to be the first to have his equipment checked. As this went on, a somewhat gangly man stepped down from the white carriage fitted with expensive glass, teetering as he walked. It was the strategist who had proposed this plan—Regis.

"...Good work," he murmured.

"Hmph. We ran around a bit and got a look at the enemy. Commend the horses, maybe, but we've hardly done any work."

"That's good... There's still time till daybreak, and I was worried we wouldn't be able to repeat our diversions."

"Is there really any point in all that?" Jerome asked, glaring at the barrels.

Regis scratched his head. "It's partly dependent on the weather, so I can't say for sure... But the way things are looking now, we should be fine as long as we continue until morning."

"It'll be magic if you manage to pull this off."

"Not exactly. It really is just *sciences naturelles*."

"Hmph. Speaking of magic... there are rumors that the Mercenary King employs a magician of his own."

"Yes, but they're entirely baseless. Something about how Gilbert's younger sister Jessica can use magic to strengthen and heal others. They say she can

even see into the future.”

“What do you think?”

“...The world’s a big place; there could actually be someone like that out there. It’s good to believe in a little mystery,” Regis replied with a pleasant smile on his face.

Jerome reached out and grabbed a handful of the tactician’s dark, green-tinted hair, then began shaking him about. “We’re about to fight those magically empowered soldiers! Do you understand me!?”

“Waah!?”

“Don’t you have any countermeasures!?”

“No, we won’t really need them.”

“What!?” Jerome released his grip, at which point Regis started patting down his hair with a troubled look on his face. He had never been too orderly to begin with, but his reaction made it evident that he did actually care in his own way.

“Ah, what to do...? Altina gets annoyed when my hair and clothes aren’t proper, you know?”

“Not my problem.”

“Hah... What a cold response...”

“Okay, I’ll humor you. Why does the princess care about how you look?”

“Hm... Because the soldiers would grow anxious upon seeing their strategist looking shabby and unreliable, perhaps?”

“If you understand that much, at least wear a sword.”

“Hahaha... The soldiers have already figured out that I can’t even chop an onion with a sword. I’m pretty sure that gesture has lost all meaning by this point.”

“Have some shame! If you consider yourself a soldier, then come to morning practice! I’ll whip you into shape!”

“...Very well. I’ll consider it when I actually have the time to sleep at night.”

The reason Regis was so busy partly came down to him being a strategist in the midst of a war. However, it also stemmed from the fact that Jerome had previously discharged all their civil officers. To say they were short on staff was an understatement—considering the scale of the Fourth Army, they would usually have another two hundred people hard at work.

Now that I think about it, we should have at least one more person...

Regis had heard that Auguste's maid, Lillim, was exceptionally proficient, and consequently left some work to her. But there were more important things to focus on right now.

"You just said there's no need to consider the magician," Jerome said. "What do you mean?"

"...Even if the Mercenary King's sister *is* a real magician, she was unable to see through my plan when we took on High Britannia's warships. Renard Pendu should have been at the port by then."

"I see. You have a point."

"That means her magic is restricted, at the very least... I imagine her presence is largely intended to provide a feeling of comfort similar to the church's prayer. Since the church is quite opposed to mercenary business, perhaps she serves as a replacement of sorts—an idol for those who seek peace of mind."

A majority of mercenaries were poor and rarely donated to the church. There was always the possibility they would turn to banditry the moment their pockets ran dry, and many brigades ended up pursuing theft as a side business regardless. In an attempt to counter this, the church preached that any mercenary with even an ounce of good in his heart would take up official service under a country or noble, or otherwise become a farmer or merchant.

Regis could see Mercenary King Gilbert passing his sister off as a magician to assuage his more devout men.

"I see... Then there really is no need to think about her."

"...We do need to be careful, though. If something does happen, we must ensure the soldiers don't grow fearful. Paranoia is terrifying to deal with."

“Hah! I’ll personally snap the neck of any fearful wimp who cowers under my command! They can go straight home in a box!”

“Y-You can’t say things like that! Only a thousand of the soldiers with us are from the border regiment. You’re going to scare our new additions.”

“Tsk. You’re no fun at all.”

Jerome thought for a moment, back to when they had called him a hero—when he only had five hundred cavalry and a thousand infantry, in the days when he was still a viscount. When he was sent to the border and given Fort Sierck, the Beilschmidt border regiment had been three thousand troops strong. And in the three years that followed, he had drilled them to perfection. But for various financial reasons, their numbers never grew much beyond that.

This fact stood even after Marie Quatre Argentina arrived. That princess hadn’t changed a thing. Rather, it had all come down to this weak-willed young man—Regis.

After forming an alliance with the barbarians and securing Fort Volks as their new base of operations, the ransom they had received for their prisoners of war allowed them to bolster their forces to six thousand. From there, negotiations with Marshal General Latrielle had paved the way for the formation of the Fourth Army. Having absorbed the Second Army, their numbers reached a peak of sixteen thousand troops. They may not have had complete control over them, and there was still a long way for them to come, but...

In half a year, their forces had grown over fivefold.

Jerome’s lips relaxed. “Well, speaking of magicians, we have a wizard of our own. I’m sure we can tell that to the soldiers to calm them down.”

Regis looked at him meekly. “No, that’s... really not true, okay?”

“Kukukuh... I use everything at my disposal to win. That’s all there is to it.”

“...Please reconsider, sir.”

In the midst of their conversation, the clatter of galloping hooves began to grow louder from somewhere among the darkness. Another unit had returned, this one built around the Second Army’s horsemen and bolstered with

mercenaries. It was led by Benjamin, whose crest was a half-moon, so they were called the Crescent Knight Brigade.

The drum of their horses' hooves was especially heavy, and once they were within firelight, it became clear that they had suffered a number of injuries. Medics rushed to them as the camp was suddenly caught up in a bustling clamor.

Much like the Black Knights, the Crescent Knights had just launched a raid, having been told to retreat after each rider had fired four shots. But their casualties were greater than anticipated.

"Hmph," Jerome scoffed. "Did he misjudge his distances or something? Goddamn amateurs."

"I didn't expect this many casualties for a night battle... Did something happen out there?"

"They spread oil around the camp and ignited it with flaming arrows. The light from the flames meant we were in plain sight."

Regis folded his arms in thought. "Oh, I see... So that's what they've gone with..."

"We lost the initiative."

"Right... I did send scouts to observe them, but they must have disguised the act of spreading oil. Pretending to throw away trash or do their business, and the like... It would be hard to notice from afar."

"Does this mean they were anticipating a night raid?"

"The camp they stole was set up on a hard-to-defend position where visibility is poor; all things considered, they would probably suspect it was a trap. I thought they might be wary, to say the least—that's why the order was to retreat right after firing."

"There are plenty of arrogant fools who don't listen to warnings. I'm sure those Crescent Knights were too eager for glory. The Second Army did lose their first battle, after all."

Belgaria was a powerful nation that sought bravery over caution, but the

winds of change had surely begun to blow—not that Jerome wanted to admit it...

Regis shrugged. “It can’t be helped. I’ll talk to Sir Benjamin later. Could we have the Black Knight Brigade leave again soon?”

“What do we do about the oil?”

“Oh, please bring some flaming arrows of your own, then shoot the ground from afar. When the oil catches fire, wait a moment for it to burn out before you attack.”

“Hm...”

He said that like it was self-evident. I’m impressed he thought it up on the spot, Jerome thought to himself. *No, on second thought, that was probably just something he read in a book somewhere.* But these small doubts weren’t the only reason he refrained from praising Regis aloud—it simply wasn’t in his nature to do so.

“Oh, and also... It’s about time for the enemy to notice we’re employing hit-and-run tactics. There’s a chance they’ll have a separate column waiting to ambush their attackers.”

“Then we’ll just need to spot them first.”

“I guess so... We do have eyes on them already; they’ll give the signal if anyone is spotted leaving the camp.” Regis said as he took out a map. He opened it up near the fire, revealing symbols written along their planned route. “Our scouts are here, at Points A and B. They should light their lanterns for you. If you don’t see them, or the lanterns remain dark, that means there’s probably an ambush.”

“Always prepared, aren’t you?”

They had brought lanterns that only shone light in one direction for situations like these, but it was still quite dangerous to illuminate one’s position in the middle of a night battle. Even if they were only lit when the knights were near, they were putting themselves in a life-and-death situation.

Jerome turned, briskly walking over to his men. “We’re going out!” he barked.

“Abidal-Evra, get your men some flame arrows! Krueger, prepare the guns! Hurry! Don’t give the enemy any time to rest!”

“Yes, sir!” the Black Knight Brigade shouted in unison.



Gilbert walked with a wooden box over one shoulder. Resting above it was another box... and then another. Any normal person would have struggled with just one, and yet he was carrying three.

“Phew...”

Seeing this, the men from his brigade hurriedly flocked to him.

“Chief!? You coulda just asked us! We woulda—!”

“If you have time to yap, start carrying the others. We’re packing food and clothes around the gunpowder. We can’t risk it getting struck by a stray bullet, otherwise we’ll all be blown sky-high.”

“G-Got it!”

His men raced to the other boxes, and in the midst of their scramble, Franziska raced over with a rifle under one arm. “I’ve spread the oil, boss!”

“Good... Though it’s pretty pointless if our enemy’s no fool.”

“Yeah, it’ll light up if they shoot it, too. That’s why I also left us some torches—that way, we’ll still have some light once the oil goes out.”

They had used this tactic before, so Franziska knew it well. Those under Gilbert’s lead learned directly from their experiences on the battlefield—in other words, war was their teacher.

Compared to blazing oil, the light of a torch was weak, meaning their soldiers’ aim would be nowhere near as good as it was during the day. However, the presence of any light at all could dissuade the horsemen from initiating a charge, so it was likely to at least buy them some time.

“About four hours until daybreak... Judging by their approach, I assume they’re waiting for us to exhaust ourselves.”

“Should we just leave now?”

“Not an option. If we have our baggage carriers walk through the night, we’ll need to stop too many times during the day. They’ll collapse, otherwise,” Gilbert explained. While leaving early was indeed an option, it would be unfeasible to spur them on without any rest.

Gilbert had expected an attack in the night. What he hadn’t expected, however, was for them to continue so incessantly. Neither did he imagine that it would become a shootout; Belgaria’s cavalry was known for its strength, so he had been waiting for them to charge with their knights.

“...They’re far more mean-spirited than I expected.”

“Who?”

“The Fourth Princess. Or perhaps her strategist.”

“Oh, Regis, was it? I may or may not have seen him before.”

“What’s he like?”

“Wimpy. Looks kinda weak, too. Oh, right—he actually screamed, ‘*Eek*.’”

“...And he’s a soldier?”

“I don’t know about that. The princess was pretty strong, though. Not stronger than me, of course! The real danger was that head of House Balzac!”

“Hm? Isn’t the current head known for being weak?”

“He’s really tough, but get this—he doesn’t want to kill people! What’s the deal with that!?”

“Oh... I know the feeling. I hate killing as well.”

“Eh? Boss?”

“What, did you think I was some trigger-happy murderer?”

“N-Not really, but...” Franziska’s eyes were wide open.

Gilbert put down his boxes, creating a protective layer around the gunpowder. Mercenaries and soldiers soon followed suit, bringing over crates packed with clothing and food. It would take a cannon shell to cause any kind of combustion now.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Gilbert exhaled. “Phew... I hate killing. But it’s better to kill than be killed. I’m not a man of faith.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

All of a sudden, his eyes darted around the camp. They captured glimpses of shadows wriggling in the dark, most likely Belgarian scouts. His lips curled into a subtle grin.

“...Well, looks like we’ll be killing tonight.”

“Yeah!” Franziska cheered, visibly delighted.

Upon returning to his tent, Gilbert started equipping the minimum amount of armor he deemed necessary, his sister gallantly helping him put it on. He then picked up the three-pronged spear that he had grown so accustomed to using. Its familiar sensation was the same as ever.

At four hours to daybreak, a thousand soldiers left camp with torches in hand and rifles over their shoulders. Their aim was to intercept the enemy rather than ambush them; instead of concealing themselves, they would draw the raiders straight to them by standing out as much as possible.

They set up formation to the west of the camp. And while Belgaria’s scouts were focused on this interception unit, Gilbert raced out with twenty of his own men in tow.



In the dead of night, the Black Knight Brigade once again raced on horseback toward the enemy camp. Their vision was obscured by the occasional patches of vegetation found even in the highlands, and the shadows of trees snatched away the already meager starlight they had to rely on; what remained was the sort of pitch-black where one might expect a demon to reside.

Jerome confirmed the map in his head—this was where the signal was supposed to be. But when he scanned the area for the light of a lantern...

Gone.

In the distance, Jerome could see the torches of the enemy camp. He pulled on his horse’s reins, slowing it to a trot. That motion alone was enough for

every knight who followed to grow wary of their surroundings, and they looked around cautiously in fear of an ambush.

A chill ran down Jerome's spine. Something felt... off.

Below us.

Jerome tugged on the reins again, making his horse change pace. He hadn't seen anything that would warrant concern; he was acting on pure intuition.

The horse moved splendidly in response, leaping in an instant as though having become suddenly weightless. Had it been able to see, or was it also acting on instinct? Whatever the case, they had managed to avoid something on the ground.

This sudden action caused many of the knights following Jerome to either stop in place or perform a similar jump, but there were some who failed to react entirely. One horse in particular was caught by its forelegs, lurched forward, and then fell to the ground. Once the others had witnessed that, it was clear for all to see: the enemy had stretched rope directly across their path.

As the balance of the massive horse crumbled, an armored knight was thrown forward. A dull *clang* quickly followed as his iron plate was caved in, then came a muffled scream. Even some of the horses that managed to avoid the rope wound up tripping on fallen comrades, leading to an even greater number of casualties.

They had thoroughly surveyed the area for such traps before the operation began, which meant they must have been set up by the enemy in the short timespan since the previous raid.

Did they predict which path we'd take? Or do they have a spy?

Regis had of course been the one to devise their plan, disclosing routes to the leader of each unit only when it was time for them to head out. By that logic, Jerome was the sole other person to have access to this information.

Wait, our scouts should know as well; they wouldn't be able to give us the signal otherwise.

The fact that the lanterns weren't lit meant there would surely be an ambush.

Or worse...

“Were our scouts taken out...?”

Someone who had set up a trap like this wouldn't be satisfied with just a few knights. Jerome focused, listening carefully for any signs of enemy combatants who were surely attempting to blend in with all the ruckus they had caused.

Behind us, from the left!

Footsteps were closing in on them. Their foes had opted not to bring their horses, presumably to better conceal themselves, and yet they moved as fast as dogs.

“The enemy!” Jerome barked, gripping the reins with his left hand and urging his horse to turn around. Though his lance was readied in his right, this sudden move meant he was momentarily more vulnerable on his unarmed side. This was no cause for worry, however—there was still distance to spare between them and the approaching attackers.

Or so he thought.

One man in particular closed in at unthinkable speeds. “Ha-hah! So *you're* the Black Knight!” he exclaimed, thrusting out his trident.

“The Mercenary King...!”

Three prongs tore through the air toward Jerome, but he managed to parry them with *Les Cheveux d'une Dame*. He had switched his lance to his left hand at the very last moment, realizing that he wouldn't have been able to react in time had he kept the weapon in his right.

A broad grin spread across the Mercenary King's face. “Khah! You did well to block that one!”

“You've got some nerve saying that after such an underhanded sleight! A king? Please! At best, you're the Mercenary Rat!”

“Not my problem! I've never called myself a king!”

The Black Knight Brigade was up against not only Mercenary King Gilbert, but roughly fifteen others as well. They were most likely from Renard Pendu, and they attacked the knights who tried to come to Jerome's aid, stopping them in

their tracks.

Jerome turned his horse to face Gilbert. “Hmph. I’ve always wanted to duel against you. Well, have at it. I’ll see if you really are as good as they say!”

After expertly switching his lance back to his right hand, Jerome lunged forward to unleash a series of consecutive thrusts—a recognized specialty of the Black Knight himself. Neither Varden’s skilled knights nor the head of the Belgianian White Wolf Brigade had endured the attack and survived.

Jerome’s efforts, however, were parried on the very first stab, and his eyes shot open wide as the trident was suddenly thrust toward his chest.

He blocked and countered my attack!

Jerome wrenched his body sideways in an attempt to dodge, his breastplate letting off sparks and an ear-grating shriek as the trident gouged through it. But he wasn’t going to back down so easily; once again, he thrust the Empire’s black lance forward, aiming to pierce through his opponent’s throat.

At the very last second, however, Gilbert knocked the lance aside with his left hand. It grazed his shoulder, then stabbed through the air.

Jerome cursed under his breath. *So he can block that, too...*

In contrast, Gilbert’s eyes were positively gleaming. “Hah! You’re not the Black Knight for nothing! To think you could dodge my trident like that. But this is just how things have to be, eh?”

“Hmph... You’re the first guy to block my lance with your bare hands. I thought you were a mercenary, not an acrobat.”

“Just how long will your confidence last, I wonder? My next move won’t be quite so slow!”

“Bring it on!”

Jerome used his lance to parry Gilbert’s next attack, converting his momentum into another lunge. His foe knocked it aside in turn before drawing his weapon back, aiming for Jerome’s thigh with an unrelenting stab.

Fine, take my leg!

Without even attempting to guard, Jerome thrust for his opponent's head. It wasn't until both weapons were sheer moments from piercing their targets that Gilbert suddenly leaped aside.

"Kuhahah!" he laughed, spit flying from his mouth. "You're the real deal, I'll give you that! No hesitation to trade a leg to get ahead."

"I've got to admit... I don't think I could take you down with anything less."

"Yes, I understand well. It would be a pleasure to fight to the death with you, Black Knight... though not worth what High Britannia is paying me," Gilbert said regretfully. Mercenaries fought for money, so going up against a stronger foe required greater compensation.

Jerome steadied his breath. "So you've put a price on your life, huh? While you're at it, you should make sure your employer's covering the cost of your funeral too."

"I'll consider it. But for now... it's about time we head off."

Gilbert raised a hand, at which point his men fighting the other knights started to retreat. As their leader, he of course moved to join them, but a single rider of the Black Knight Brigade rushed out to intercept his withdrawal.

"You're not getting away!"

It was Second-Grade Combat Officer Krueger. With a long spear in hand, he moved to attack.

"Oi! Give it up!" Jerome yelled. But his warning fell on deaf ears.

"He landed an attack on our general; it'll be a disgrace if we let him leave in one piece!"

Gilbert blocked the incoming spear, but Krueger skillfully leveraged his range advantage to avoid the counter and lunge again.

"Fine," Gilbert grunted through gritted teeth. "Looks like your subordinate saved you, Black Knight."

Jerome initially failed to understand what the man meant, but this bemusement was short-lived; out of nowhere, gunshots thundered through the forest. Krueger suddenly lurched back, lost his balance, and dropped to the

ground. The remaining knights took out their firearms, as if only now remembering them, and shot back.

Countless blasts echoed across the highlands, but Gilbert and his Renard Pendu mercenaries had already disappeared into the shadows of the trees.

“Oi!” Jerome leaped down from his horse and raced over to the fallen Krueger. He hurriedly removed the man’s helmet, but the face beneath was drained of vigor, and the eyes that met him were completely hollow.

“Urgh... General...” Krueger groaned, blood trickling from his mouth. His hefty metal breastplate bore three bullet holes; the shots had presumably reached his internal organs.

What a carefully prepared trap... Jerome thought. They had no doubt captured and interrogated Belgaria’s scouts to learn the route, then set up a rope to isolate the one leading the charge. Gilbert was thus able to challenge him one-on-one, and on the off chance that the Mercenary King was unsuccessful, there were snipers stationed in the forest who could take aim while the Black Knight Brigade was locked down.

Had Krueger not charged out, perhaps Jerome would have taken those bullets himself. Gritting his teeth, he grabbed his dying ally by the shoulders and hoisted him up.

“Enough nonsense! I’m leaving you behind if you so much as close your eyes! *Get up, Krueger!* This is an order!”

“...I can’t... see...”

“Krueger! I said get a grip!”

“I just... wanted to... be... like...”

With that, Krueger fell silent. No further words would ever pass his lips.

“...Goddamn fool.”



Despite their casualties, the Black Knight Brigade still carried out its duty. The enemy had dispatched another flying column, but the knights dealt enough damage to make them retreat to their camp. They then continued to fire on the

enemy from afar, as per their schedule, before eventually retreating back to the agreed checkpoint.

Now, during this momentary lull in the action, was the time to mourn the fallen. Their bodies were placed side by side, and those who had survived surrounded them while a priest chanted prayers.

Regis watched this from his perch atop a nearby box. No one had uttered so much as a word of complaint to him about the plan, but even so, whenever he learned that someone had died under his command, he was overcome with a sickening sensation as though his stomach was filled with lead. A sigh escaped his throat—one of many since hearing the news.

The drowsy Crescent Knights were preparing for the next attack. Their leader, Benjamin, rode alongside his brother and deputy commander, Justin, but the two had ventured too close to the enemy during the last assault, consequently raising their number of casualties by quite some margin. They certainly wouldn't repeat that mistake—or so they maintained. As there were no substitutes for their roles, Regis could only count on them making such necessary corrections themselves.

Braying horses, the clatter of armor, guns being loaded, the calls of soldiers... Amid the clamor of the Crescent Knights' preparations, the carriages transporting new scouts set off ahead. Jerome's report had revealed that their initial scouts were most likely captured and forced to divulge their attack route, but they were trained units hidden in a dark forest—who would have guessed they could be found so easily? Perhaps that spoke to how competent Renard Pendu truly was.

Their situation was growing all the more dangerous, but Regis wouldn't dare send any troops into battle without investigating first. That was why he was sending another unit of scouts on the same perilous mission.

Regis was feeling a mixture of unease and impatience. Their casualties were greater than expected; he hadn't anticipated they would lose so many scouts or knights.

Not everything is going to go as smoothly as it does in my books. I know that.

He had set up this plan fully aware that people would die in the process, and

yet a shiver still ran down his spine. As he watched the new scouts depart, he felt as though he had suddenly aged several dozen years. He was just as spindly and flimsy as he remembered, yet his body felt so heavy that he couldn't so much as raise a finger. Even trying to breathe was a struggle.

His heart, however, pounded even faster than usual. Despite the lack of any notable heat, sweat incessantly trickled down into his eyes, and an unpleasant sticky dampness made his shirt cling to his back. After so many casualties, would this plan even succeed? Did it have enough merit to warrant such losses? Perhaps there might have been a more appropriate alternative that would have lowered their death count.

"What's the matter, Regis? You look really down. Oh, are you hungry?"

The sudden voice took Regis by surprise, and he turned to see Altina holding out a potato in her lightly-armored right hand.

"Err... I'm okay, thank you. I don't have much of an appetite right now."

"Who's going to take command if you collapse?"

Well, there's you and Sir Jerome... Regis mused, before sternly dismissing the thought. By allowing himself to pass out, he would effectively be abandoning his responsibilities.

"You're right. I should eat a proper meal."

"Right?" Altina replied with a smile, placing the potato in his palm.

"Hot! *Hot!* Why is this so hot!?"

"It's freshly baked. Potatoes taste far better that way."

Regis hurriedly passed the potato between his hands, trying to keep from getting burned as he waited for it to cool. "H-How were you completely unfazed while holding something this hot?"

"I'm more concerned about how weak you are. You've got a decent amount of experience on the battlefield—aren't you used to eating potatoes with your hands? Well, unless you're putting them in a stew, I suppose."

Other cooking methods were indeed possible with a proper stove, but the rudimentary camps set up in times of combat were seldom equipped with more

than a bonfire.

“Ever since I was a kid, I’ve always read during meals. With my hands occupied, most of my food—potatoes included—usually spends a lot more time on my plate.”

It was also for this reason that Regis had learned to use a fork, since eating with his hands would only dirty whatever book he was reading. This was a trend that had carried on even now that he could eat at his own leisure.

“Doesn’t it get cold?”

“Well, I’ve always struggled with hot food; my mouth burns much too easily.”

“But some foods are especially delicious when they’re piping hot! You sure are a strange one, Regis...” Altina said with an amused laugh, leading him to return a wry smile.

Oh, so I can still smile... It seemed that the overwhelming sense of dread tormenting his heart had somewhat cleared up.

Altina plopped herself down on the same box as Regis, sitting close enough that her shoulders brushed against his. When he glimpsed over, her profile immediately caught his eye, strikingly illuminated by the flickering bonfire. His breath caught in his throat. How could one woman be so utterly bewitching?

Regis quickly averted his gaze. Altina was the fourth princess of the Belgarian Empire, as well as the commander he served; he needed to remember his place.

“...Are you ready, Altina? There’s still some time till daybreak.”

“I’ve finished my preparations. It’s just... I can’t sleep. I’m probably too worked up.”

“That doesn’t surprise me; we’re mere hours away from a decisive battle.”

“Regis... Is something worrying you? You don’t look well.”

“We’re at war. There isn’t much I’m not worried about.”

“That’s not what I mean... If you don’t want to tell me, though, I won’t force you.”

She really is growing more by the day, Regis thought. She had always been virtuous and just, but now he could pick up a sense of forbearance as well. She was still impulsive by nature, but a little more thoughtful. Perhaps she was becoming more mature, or maybe his own downtrodden, borderline childish behavior had prompted her to step up.

Regis bit into the potato. It hadn't cooled much at all, but he tried to ignore the heat and gather his thoughts as he chewed.

"My main worry," he eventually began, "is that a lot of people are dying because of my decisions. It's making me feel quite ill."

"As you said, Regis—we're at war. It really can't be helped. Casualties are a given. Whether we win or lose, plenty of people will lose their lives without having done anything to deserve it. No matter how good a person is, how hard they've trained, or how much they're loved, the possibility of death is always there."

"...Yeah. I know."

"That's why I want to become empress. I'll put an end to the wars. I'll shape a country that doesn't have to fight its neighbors."

"...Yeah."

"If we got along with them better, perhaps even High Britannia wouldn't have waged war on us."

"I agree. But with how many times Belgaria has gone to war with its surrounding territories, I doubt they'll suddenly warm up to us. We're pretty widely hated."

"And you're saying hatred endures forever?"

"If you want me to be blunt... history proves that it does. Thoughts and feelings may change on an individual level, but if you consider a country as a single unit, then hatred is never forgotten. After a building burns down, it may at first glance look as though the flames have died out. But there are still embers smoldering beneath the rubble, and it takes only a slight gust to set everything ablaze again. Oftentimes, countries that once formed armistices and peace deals are soon at war again."

“So war can never go away entirely?”

“If we could maintain an era of peace long enough to reach our grandchildren and great-grandchildren, then perhaps more substantial change could come about when the older generation eventually dies out. You can’t erase hatred, but you can’t pass it down either. It might even be possible to bury it entirely, assuming peace went on for long enough.”

“But a parent could always teach their child that, say, Belgaria is the enemy, which might in turn be passed on to their children.”

“Education does play an important role in one’s perceptions, but hatred is an emotion. You could plant preconceived notions in a person’s mind using academia, for example, but someone who has only ever experienced peace with the Empire wouldn’t truly hate us from the depths of their heart.”

“So that’s how it works...”

“Feelings vary from person to person, but a nation’s sentiment is an accumulation of the larger majority. At the very least, I don’t think there would be any wars grounded in hatred. Countries may have differing interests... but there would be more room for negotiation should such problems arise.”

Altina nodded, a serious look on her face. Even in cases where two nations were opposed on a matter, the issue could be resolved through discussion rather than war. Surely that was the future she set her sights on.

“But if we let the war drag on, relations with our neighboring countries will never improve,” she said.

“Precisely. Something has to change, otherwise one side will inevitably fall. In fact, any nation that cannot agree to peace will crumble eventually; no matter how strong an army may be, the day always comes where it loses the fight.”

“I want to change the Empire—to make it a country where no one has to give up their lives in battle.”

“Right.”

“And to do that, we must first overcome the crisis before our eyes.”

“...I know.”

“I understand this may not be easy, but... please, think of the people who are still alive, rather than those we’ve lost.”

Regis looked around blankly. He had seen so many soldiers grieving that his thoughts were completely focused on the dead. It seemed that no matter how rationally he tried to view things, his emotions were still able to overpower him at times. He took a deep breath, and his mind—clouded with guilt and weary from sleep deprivation—seemed to clear ever so slightly.

“...Thank you. I’m okay now.”

“You are? I can’t say I really understand, but I’m happy that you’re feeling better.”

“...The casualties were greater than I expected.”

“Because of the Mercenary King?”

“Most likely. The more scouts we send out, the more won’t come back. Perhaps that’s inevitable... The Black Knight Brigade lost ten men during their attack, a combat officer included. Quite a few more were injured.”

Altina silently nodded. The way her subordinates were acting was enough to give away that there had been fatalities, but this was the first time she was hearing actual figures.

“But is the plan going smoothly?”

“...It is. I spoke to the soldiers who hail from these parts; both the wind and temperature are ideal. Our allies are continuing to follow orders, and our enemy’s movements are still within expectations.”

Sixteen thousand troops made up the Empire’s Fourth Army. They had attacked with two cavalry brigades numbering four hundred horsemen each, and it took two thousand people to prepare their meals, treat their wounds, tend to their horses, and maintain their guns.

The knights’ attacks served to nail the enemy army down to that campsite. High Britannia’s supply unit still needed to travel another 50 lieue (222 km) to reach the main forces near the capital, and they wouldn’t be able to move without adequate preparations. What’s more, once they knew further raids

were imminent, rather than distributing their forces over a larger radius, they would almost certainly concentrate on defending their convoy. For that reason, Regis was paying no mind to protecting Belgaria's main camp; he left only the minimum number of lookouts behind, assigning the rest of the soldiers to carry out one particular job.

Altina looked to the east. Their surroundings were barely illuminated by the stars above, but perhaps she could see something through the darkness. Two hours remained until daybreak.



Both the Black Knights and Crescent Knights prepared to sortie. They had stalled long enough; the sky would brighten soon.

Regis glanced at the flag hoisted over the camp. The wind was pitifully weak, but under their current circumstances, the limp, dangling banner was a most promising sight to behold.

A man marched through the undergrowth toward him, offering a friendly, informal salute. "Think we can do it, Tactician?"

"Yes, Ferdinand. All thanks to you."

Ferdinand Stuttgart, captain of the sappers—while he looked quite worn out from the work that had carried on all through the night, his expression was brimming with satisfaction. "The morning is warm, windless, and humid. Splendid, don't you agree!?"

"Yeah. We couldn't have hoped for better."

"It was certainly worth the investment of twelve thousand troops, if not just for this sight. I'll be bragging to my grandson about this once—or should I say *if*—we make it back. You have my thanks."

"No need. I'm just glad you were there, Ferdinand. Otherwise, even had I made the proposition, I doubt we could have carried it out. You've been helping me out since Fort Volks."

Regis had sought out the best engineers he could find when tunneling into the fortress, and even after that, Ferdinand's sappers had continued to prove their

worth; they played crucial roles in both modifying its defenses after the capture and during the recent battle against Varden.

“Back when I first enlisted, my job was construction. I was setting up tents and stoves, under the impression that building a bridge or something would be the biggest contribution I could ever make.”

“Well, that would be true under normal circumstances, yes.”

“That’s why I was surprised when you got me to dig all the way under an enemy fortress. And when you had me make those detonation devices, too. This one, though—this is the clincher.”

“I’d read about it before, but there were no records of anything quite on this scale. I was a bit anxious... but it looks like it might work out.”

“Yes, it’s getting rather misty already.”

“Yeah.”

“This isn’t the season or region for a sudden gust of wind. Don’t worry—it’ll work, I’m sure!”

“...Back when I lived in the capital, there were times I would open the window and see nothing but pure white. But I’ve never seen it set in right before my eyes like this.”

“Neither have I.”

The rising sun lit up the area. Even with the glow from the bonfires, it was impossible to overlook the white filter coating everything in sight. A thick fog was setting in. They had extracted enough water to metaphorically lower the sea level and, over the course of the night, splashed it all over the region.

Their plan was simple enough: Regis had learned that naturally occurring fog had numerous forms, with a type called radiation fog existing among them. It stemmed from a phenomenon known as radiative cooling—heat from the earth would dissipate into the air over the night, lowering the temperature of the air closest to the ground.

While air would always contain a certain amount of water vapor, that amount decreased as the temperature lowered. And when the temperature dropped

low enough for the air to reach complete saturation, condensation would occur. This changed the gaseous water vapor into minute liquid droplets, which then suspended in the air as fog.

Fog formed most easily in the inland regions, especially valleys and basins with barely any wind, and as it turned out, the uplands of west La Frengé were an inland basin with terribly weak winds this time of year. It was usually sunny and dry, meaning it was unlikely for fog to develop, but if ample water were splashed onto the ground, this would fulfill all the necessary criteria.

Incidentally, the only difference between fog and clouds was that fog remained at or near the ground. Clouds were composed of what was essentially the same visible aerosol, and once the suspended water droplets stuck to one another and grew to the point that they fell, they came down as rain.

These phenomena had all been studied by natural scientists and compiled into academic papers, and experiments on how to form fog had already begun to circulate—albeit on a smaller scale.

If the enemy couldn't see, then the longer range of their guns was meaningless; increased firepower was nothing to fear when the shots would never hit their targets. What's more, it would now be impossible for them to slip out of these hilly lands faster than horsemen, especially when carrying all their precious supplies; in the dead of night, it was possible to light a torch or ignite scattered oil with a flaming arrow, but clearing away fog was another story entirely.

Regis squinted through the white, cloudy mist that surrounded them. "Now then... let's get moving."

Chapter 3: Gilbert, the Mercenary King

The horses' hooves gave rise to a rustling noise as they trampled the undergrowth, the carriage's wheels clattering along with them. Enzo the blacksmith was seated cross-legged inside, a casket-like wooden crate resting before him. Inside was the most important item he would ever deliver—Princess Argentina's esteemed sword, the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*.

Beside him was his apprentice Lionel, who, despite the rocking and shaking of the moving carriage, was busy at work adding detail to a hinge. After securing it in place, he held the tip of a scratch awl against the flat surface before gently tapping it with a metal hammer. This process left a small mark on the hinge, and it took many, many more strikes before a design started to surface.

The old man who had joined them on their journey was fast asleep, perhaps worn thin by a long voyage.

Enzo moved aside the curtain separating him from the cabman's perch to see their surroundings. He was met with white. Pure white. A heavy fog had set in.

It was about time for the sun to climb across the eastern sky, and yet their vision was no better than it would have been during the night. He struggled to make out the horses pulling the carriage, let alone the military horseman who was leading the way.

With that thought, their guide looked back in their direction. Enzo imagined that he was most likely regarding them with a modest smile, but despite how close the man was, his expression was hidden beneath the veil of white.

"This fog sure is thick, don't you think?" the horseman asked.

Enzo replied with a nod. "You took the words right outta my mouth."

"I can't tell east from west anymore," the cabman added, shrugging his shoulders.

"Hah. Don't you worry—we haven't left the highway," the horseman said confidently. "And say what you want about me, but my sense of direction is the

one thing that never lets me down.”

They had met with the horseman serving as their guide at the point indicated in Regis’s letter, and he would apparently deliver them to the army’s main camp. If unforeseen circumstances resulted in said camp being moved, then there was supposed to be a second guide waiting for them at its original spot.

“Still...” the horseman muttered. “Did it rain yesterday? I can’t quite recall. Sure, the weak wind makes it easy for fog to settle here, but something like this is pretty rare this time of year, what with all the dry spells.”

Having been listening to the conversation from inside the carriage, Lionel leaned out, somewhat interested. “Some areas are more prone to fog?”

“Of course. These are the highlands, but we’re surrounded by mountains, and there’s hardly any wind. Then there’s the ground—soft with bad drainage. Whenever it rains— Well, even a little rain wouldn’t produce something like this.”

“Do you think it rained during the night, then?”

“Can’t say for sure. There are a few too many spots that aren’t wet, though...”

The sounds heard as the horses moved across the highlands varied with each step—a dry, firm *crunch* would be succeeded by a wet *squelch*. The same held true for the wheels—one moment they would be running along hard ground, and the next they would splash through a puddle. It was quite the surreal sensation.

“It’s almost like someone splashed water all over the place!” Lionel exclaimed with deep intrigue.

Enzo, the carriage driver, and the horseman all looked around blankly. There was no wind, and the white fog hanging in the air greatly obscured their vision. They couldn’t see them, but there were supposed to be high hills stretching out around them. They also would have spotted a mountain range in the distance had it been a clear day. Could someone have really sprayed enough water over the whole region to replicate the effects of rain?

The horseman cocked his head quizzically, but Enzo couldn’t imagine it at all. “Splashed water? Who’d do something like that, and for what reason?”

“Oh c’mon, boss. I’m only kidding around,” Lionel chuckled.

At this, the guiding horseman’s expression loosened. He let out a quiet laugh himself, when—

«Halt! You there! What is your affiliation!?»

From among the fog came a sharp voice, speaking in High Britannian. The guide’s eased smile vanished, and his face quickly paled as soldiers came into view. They couldn’t have been more than twenty paces away, and there were around ten in all. They were mostly on foot, with only one person atop a horse—a man wearing a helmet.

An enemy patrol, perhaps? They didn’t seem to be flying a flag of any kind, but their words erased all doubt that they were members of the High Britannian Army.

The cabman’s voice quavered as he asked, “What do we do, boss...?”

As a humble blacksmith, Enzo of course had no idea how to deal with an enemy patrol. His only hope was their guide, but it seemed there were times when knowing the proper measures only made things worse; the horseman appeared to have fallen the deepest into despair, having turned as white as a sheet.

Fleeing almost certainly wasn’t an option; the enemy troops carried rifles, and there would be no survivors if they all fired at once. Even in a best-case scenario, it seemed unlikely that their guide would escape unscathed, and with him disposed of, the enemy rider would effortlessly catch up to their carriage. To make matters worse, the carriage’s only occupants were a blacksmith, his apprentice, a carriage driver, and an old man. They couldn’t possibly put up a fight.

Do we surrender? Enzo considered the move, but he knew it wasn’t an option. He would never forgive himself if one of the Empire’s treasured swords fell into enemy hands on his watch. But then what else could they do?

All of a sudden, the guide whispered to them. “I’m sorry. This is my fault. I thought, with how thick the fog is, that it’d be safe to use the highway. We should have taken a detour...”

“No, that’s not—”

“Please, run. The camp is five lieue (22 km) west. I’ll distract their horseman.”

The guide’s hand reached for the sword at his hip. Perhaps their current situation was indeed his fault, but he was a fine man nonetheless; he had a clear sense of responsibility.

Meanwhile, the High Britannian soldiers drew nearer and nearer, their guns at the ready.

Enzo placed a hand on the driver’s shoulder. “The moment he draws his sword, have the horses run as fast as they can,” he whispered in his ear.

But the soldiers stopped ten paces away. They kept their guns pointed and shouted in Belgarian: “Dismount your horse! Driver, on the ground, too! Everyone down, or we’ll shoot you dead!”

How could this be...? They’re not even giving us a chance!

There was nothing they could do. Their guide would ultimately be executed the moment he unsheathed his sword, and even with the carriage going at full speed, there was little hope in them getting out alive.

Enzo’s hands quivered. As the reality of their situation began to truly set in, he found himself struggling to breathe. *We’ll need to take a gamble. I’ll rush out, going in the opposite direction to the guide... and while they’re shooting at us, the carriage’ll make a break for it.*

But as that dreary thought passed through his mind, a figure dressed in a fluttering brown robe walked past the side of the carriage. The old man who was supposed to have been sleeping in the back calmly approached the High Britannian soldiers.

«Shoot us dead? That’s not very merciful.»

«Identify yourself!»

«I’m just an old man—no one suspicious. Take a better look, if you want. Big as you are, what have you got to fear from someone as ancient as me?»

He was now five paces from the soldiers.

«Hands out of your robe!»

«Of course. As you wish.»

He removed his brown robe entirely, letting it drop to the ground. His build was moderate—average, even—though with his stoop he stood about as tall as a child. There was no doubting that he was an old man. He wore the sort of plain hemp shirt that could be found in any country, tucked under a belt from which his plain longsword dangled.

The armored horseman made another demand. «Toss your sword aside!»

«If you act so frightened of such a frail old-timer, you'll surely be the laughingstock of your men.»

«Do you want to be shot!?!»

Unfortunately, the soldier they were dealing with was considerably cautious. But the old man simply shrugged and removed his sword.

«Fine, fine. Have it your way. It's only cheap, but it's been passed down since my great-grandfather's days. Keep a close eye on it!»

With that, he tossed the sword up into the air. It spun circles as it climbed to such a height that one had to wonder where this sudden burst of strength had come from. Enzo followed the blade with his eyes, as did the High Britannian soldiers. It ascended up into the fog until it was no more than a gray silhouette, when... *Clink*. There was a strange sound.

What was that?

Enzo hurriedly looked back down to see that the old man was gone.

“Ghh... Aghh...!”

Then came another noise—a strangled groan from the armored High Britannian horseman. The old man had reappeared behind him, wrapping his arms around the soldier's shoulders like a child getting a piggyback ride. His hands were on the man's helmet, and the head in his grasp had been turned to an impossible angle.

He... broke his neck.

Letting out hacks, gasps, and other sounds that no human should emit, the armored horseman started to foam at the mouth before eventually spitting up blood.

The old man sneered. “My name is Balthazar Basil de Balzac, elder of a lineage that has passed down the sword of *L’Empereur Flamme* for generations!”

He reached down and drew the weapon at the unmoving horseman’s hip—a brilliant silver sword fashioned from High Britannia’s new alloy. Its blade was double-edged, thinning up to a fine tip. Swords that maintained their width all the way along were the current preference in Belgaria, making this more similar to the blades mass-produced around fifty years prior, though perhaps this style was still popular in High Britannia.

“Hm... A fine blade. I shall borrow it.”



Balthazar then disappeared again. Or at least, that was the only way Enzo could describe it. The old man, who had been riding atop the horse just moments ago, had leaped into the air without any preparatory movements.

The closest rifleman let out a gasp. There was blood spewing from his throat.

They had witnessed their commander die, a grand reveal, and then the death of another comrade, all in the span of a few seconds. Most comprehensible thoughts had already vanished from the enemy soldiers' minds.

«Kill him!» one man hastily screamed in High Britannian. «Open fire!»

There was an immediate explosion of gunshots, but at close range on terrain with very few obstacles, there was no guarantee that firearms had the advantage—especially not against someone whose movements seemed to surpass human understanding.

The result was far too one-sided to even call a battle, not a single soul managing to capture any of Balthazar's moves. Blood scattered through the air as each attack felled another soldier, and in the blink of an eye, not a single one remained on their feet.

After just one glance at the mountain of corpses, Balthazar tossed the pilfered sword aside. Despite having been made from the new alloy, the blade was already in a terrible state; he had used it to sever flesh through armor, a feat that was inconceivable for a normal person.

Balthazar picked up both the robe and longsword he had been forced to abandon before once again springing into action. “Why are you zoning out?” he asked sharply. “Those gunshots will attract more enemies. Can't you hurry with the wagon?”

The driver hurriedly flicked the reins, at which point Enzo reached out to the old man. “Grab on!”

Balthazar firmly grasped the hand that had been extended to him, and Enzo pulled him up into the carriage as it passed.

Their guide took the lead on his horse. “We'll take a detour off the main road! Please, follow me!”

“I’m counting on you!” replied the driver as they both picked up speed.

Balthazar stumbled back to his seat, wheezing heavily. “I wouldn’t have been able to handle twenty...” he muttered.

“That was pretty impressive. You’re a duke, right? Granted, I didn’t know, but still—I’ve been pretty rude to you,” Enzo said, respectfully lowering his head. But Balthazar dismissed him with a wave.

“Oh, what does it matter? All those grand words were simply a means to distract them. Just let me remain an old man, would you?”



Warhorses tore through the surrounding blanket of white, causing the ground to tremble beneath their hooves. Four hundred Black Knights and five hundred Crescent Knights rode together, with a few lightly armored horsemen bolstering them to one thousand.

Together they closed in on ten thousand High Britannian foot soldiers, surrounding them from all sides. The enemy hadn’t moved their supplies from the camp prior to the fog thickening—that much had already been confirmed—and they almost certainly hadn’t made any attempts to since. No matter how stealthy they tried to be, it was near impossible for their wagons to leave without any noticeable noise.

Belgarian scouts closely watched the enemy’s movements through the fog. They reported every little detail to the knight brigades, at the front of which rode Jerome with Abidal-Evra beside him.

“Recon report! The enemy remains stationary!” one scout announced.

“Good!” Jerome exclaimed. “Diversions, go!”

The bugler relayed the order, at which point four parties of twenty split from their ranks and joined the front, following the instructions that had been given to them prior to the attack. While on horseback, they pulled pieces of wood tied to rope from their sacks and dropped them on the ground. Rather loud scraping noises almost immediately followed as the wood was dragged along behind them—a racket that would no doubt steal the enemy’s ears. Their plan was to ride around the camp, making it harder for the High Britannians to pin

down the movements of their main force.

The sound of gunfire echoed out from among the fog... but the Belgian horsemen were positioned too far away for this to be an actual concern.

They couldn't have made it clearer that they can't see a thing right now. It seemed that the Mercenary King hadn't foreseen such a development, but this certainly was a crude response.

"Vanguard, advance!" Jerome barked.

"Graaaaaah!" the Crescent Knights roared as they charged ahead. They were firing on the camp from a distance, though they were considerably closer than they had been during their fleeting attacks peppered throughout the night.

Soon enough, High Britannia began to return fire. But the Crescent Knights weren't approaching in a straight line—they had approached as if drawing a circle, and so the shots disappeared into the open air.

Even in the dead of night, metal armor reflected the light of the stars. The glow of a bonfire also spread quite some distance, and when coupled with the use of equipment such as flaming arrows, an army could never truly remain invisible.

But that had now changed.

To think fog would make them resort to such a lazy counterattack... Jerome was beyond shocked, now feeling somewhat astounded.

That said, this entire situation was centered around the fact that the enemy had supplies they needed to protect; they couldn't simply leave them behind, but their wagons were slower and made too much noise. High Britannia's forces had consequently reached a standstill. Under any other circumstances, each side would no doubt have been probing through the fog for the other's location—a battle on equal footing—but it was precisely because their foes had set up their defenses, intending to make use of their superior ranged weapons, that it worked in Belgaria's favor.

While the enemy's offenses were concentrated on the Crescent Knights, Jerome raised his lance high into the air and thrust it forward, signaling for the Black Knights to charge. He purposely didn't spur his horse, however. Instead,

he and his men attempted to stifle as much sound as possible as they cautiously closed the distance.

Gradually, the bursts of gunfire grew louder. Should the fog choose this very moment to clear, the rifles of however many bloodthirsty High Britanniains would be pointed straight in their direction.

Another moment passed. They were still too far away. From their current position, Jerome's lance certainly wouldn't be able to reach its target. And yet, from this distance, the enemy's bullets would pierce even the thickest parts of his armor. This was the range at which guns were most effective.

Jerome led his horse onward, moving as calmly as someone parading before a crowd. The other knights had broken into a cold sweat, and understandably so. Didn't it seem like the horsemen were dragging their noisemakers along too quietly? Weren't the Crescent Knights being too lax on their offense? If they made it too obvious they were just trying to draw the enemy's attention, wouldn't they figure out what was going on? These questions only heightened the knights' fears and anxieties. They were traversing a world of pure white, staring straight into the complete unknown that was certain death.

A black shadow soon came into view—a High Britanniain soldier poised with a large shield. Before Jerome could even make out any other details, he kicked his horse's sides.

“Chaaaarge!”

At his command, the vanguard raced forth. The distance to the enemy camp was a mere twenty paces—less than an instant away for a warhorse moving at full speed.

The soldier let loose a scream, his eyes shooting open in shock. «The enemy!»

“Hraaaah!”

As Jerome thrust forward his famous lance, the man hastily attempted to defend himself. The shield he carried sported a metal frame but was otherwise made almost entirely of wood; using thick enough plates to stop swords and spears would make it much too unwieldy to use, and anything thinner wouldn't provide adequate enough defense.

Of course, the wooden boards stood no chance against a charging knight—their speed, strength, and quality of weapon made them an exponentially bigger threat than a foot soldier with a polearm. The shield shattered almost immediately, offering zero resistance as Jerome's lance continued its course and plunged into the man's torso.

“Gwuh!?” Blood quickly began to trickle from the enemy soldier's mouth.

“Graaaaaah! Anyone with a death wish, come at me!” Jerome yelled, swinging his lance. The movement threw aside the impaled soldier, who rolled along the ground in a gruesomely bloody display.

«Riflemen! Over here! Fire!»

Jerome turned his horse toward the officer barking orders in High Britannian. The man was pointing a rifle in his direction, trying to steady his aim.

“Too slow!” Jerome roared, lunging forward again. In one swift move, he knocked aside the gun and opened a gaping hole in the officer's chest.

By this point, the rest of the brigade had managed to breach the camp's simple defenses and were promptly disposing of the enemy soldiers. There was little that could be done to stop them now that they were inside.

As the attack continued, High Britannia's transporters hid under their wagons and atop their cargo, trembling in fear with their heads in their hands. Belgian carriers were trained as soldiers, meaning they would have armed themselves with spears and joined the battle in such a situation, but this was an understandable difference between a nation that had waged endless wars for hundreds of years and its relatively peaceful neighbor.

A point-blank shot caught one knight, causing him to topple from his horse. But as the enemy soldier tried to reload, a second horseman charged in with a spear and skewered his head. It irked Jerome to no end seeing his men die to what were evidently untrained soldiers, but he had already steeled himself against the losses.

Abidal-Evra came up beside him. “The enemy troops are fleeing!”

The High Britannian soldiers were indeed throwing down their rifles, pushing down the protective fences they had erected themselves in a scramble to

escape.

Jerome scoffed. “Ignore them. They’ll still need to get through the Crescent Knights and foot soldiers.”

“Yes, sir!”

Had the enemy forgotten they were up against an army of sixteen thousand men? Even if they managed to evade the knights attacking the camp, there were far more soldiers in the encirclement. But even as Jerome watched them retreat, there was something far more important occupying his mind.

“Oi... Did you catch sight of Gilbert?”

“The Mercenary King? Ah, no, we—”

Everyone they had encountered appeared to be a regular soldier of the High Britannian Army; Jerome hadn’t seen anyone who looked even remotely like a mercenary.

“Tsk. So they turned tail. Unless...” Jerome abruptly turned his horse around with a sharp tug on its reins. “Oi, Abidal-Evra. Clean up the remnants, and secure the supplies as best you can. If you face too much resistance, then burn it all down!”

“Understood, sir! Er... What about you, General?”

“I’m returning to camp! Listen here, you lot! If any of you think you can manage one more round trip, come with me!” After raising his voice to the knights surrounding him, Jerome raced off as though he were charging at the enemy, growling through gritted teeth. “I won’t forgive you if you die here...!”



There was a chance they would need to move at a moment’s notice, and so the tent—as well as all the other camping equipment—had already been packed away. The main camp was now denoted by nothing more than a single flag.

A chair had been set down for Altina, plus a table that was being used for strategy discussions. Regis stared at the map spread out over its surface, moving pieces based on scout reports as he tried to grasp the situation as a

whole. There was some distance to the front line, which meant the information he received was always somewhat behind.

Belgaria's main camp was now even farther east than it had been the night before, only one lieue (4 km) from the enemy's camp; Regis had wanted it set up as near as possible to allow for more frequent and accurate updates. This came with a risk, however—positioning themselves too close increased the chance they would also engage the enemy, and it would be catastrophic for the main camp to be attacked when he'd stationed most of their soldiers elsewhere.

While the Empire's soldiers were powerful, High Britannia's tactical combination of shield and rifle was a very real threat. The Seventh Army had managed to force a close-combat encounter—an area in which they excelled—and were still overwhelmed. What's more, if the battlefield became too chaotic, it would be near impossible to take strategic command; whatever plans Regis came up with would serve no purpose if they couldn't be relayed to the soldiers. Though the fog had rendered the enemy's superior range meaningless, he had exposed his own side to greater danger.

Despite a chair having been prepared for her, Altina had remained standing since daybreak. Her arms were tightly folded, a dejected look on her face as she glared into the fog. When Regis had suggested she remain at camp, he was sure she would refuse, but...

"If staying here is going to benefit our army, I'll put up with it," she reluctantly conceded. Perhaps her time aboard the warship had taught her the importance of carrying out one's own role—quite favorable growth for someone who stood above others.

The faint sound of gunfire could be heard, but the battlefield was far away enough that neither thundering hooves nor the cries of soldiers reached them.

Altina stuck out her lips in a pout. "Mh... Hey, Regis? Couldn't we have moved just a little closer?"

"...That probably wouldn't work out very well. There's a high chance the enemy army will abandon their camp, and when that happens, the last thing we want is them discovering our position."

“I... guess you’re right.”

That said, even in such a case, they would most likely have the numerical advantage; there were still about five thousand foot soldiers guarding the main camp. The rest were on the offensive—ten thousand foot soldiers encircling the enemy camp, six hundred horsemen running around as a diversion, and four hundred Black Knights on the charge. The actual numbers were a little lower than this owing to the casualties from the previous night’s operation, but those losses had yet to reach the triple digits.

A messenger ran over to Regis and, following a prompt salute, began to deliver his report.

“...And that’s everything so far!” he soon concluded.

Regis moved the pieces on the map accordingly. This latest information indicated that the Black Knight Brigade had charged the enemy camp, and the Crescent Knights were succeeding in their diversion.

“I see, I see... In that case, please pass this on to Sir Benjamin,” Regis said, handing over a directive he had prepared in advance.

“Understood!”

The messenger stuffed the paper into a tube on his back before sprinting away. Regis once again glanced at the map. There had been no blunders yet. The plan was proceeding smoothly.

“Hm...”

“What’s up, Regis?” Altina asked, noticing him hang his head.

“Well, everything’s going off without a hitch.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“It is, yeah.”

“...Are you disappointed things are going so well?”

“Me? Not at all. I simply mean to say there’s been far too little resistance given that the Mercenary King is at the helm. I thought they might predict the route of our diversion unit and use that to their advantage.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Crescent Knights are drawing a circle around the camp—something that should be easy to figure out, even with the fog surrounding them. From there, the enemy might guess that the real attack is coming from somewhere else entirely.”

“Then the fog’s totally meaningless!”

“On the contrary, it’s much harder for them to land their shots when they can’t see who they’re aiming at. But as I was saying—assuming the High Britannians *did* predict our route, they should be able to tell where the imperial army *isn’t* stationed, right?”

“Huh?”

“Er, what I mean is... they can tell that our main force won’t be where the diversion units have already fired from. Because that’s where we’re expecting them to concentrate their return fire.”

“Oh, I suppose.”

“...So I was expecting High Britannia’s supply unit to make a full-speed dash into an area the Crescent Knights had already passed through, bringing their wagons with them.”

Such was the counterplay Regis had expected from the enemy—the only move he thought they could make once the fog had set in, assuming they didn’t surrender. He thought it would be far too poor of a plan for them to continue point defense, especially given the sheer mess of a battlefield that would result in.

Altina cocked her head to one side. “But if they rush through an area where nobody’s stationed, won’t they get away?”

“When you have wagons in tow, you can only travel at full speed for so long. I had foot soldiers ready to intercept them around the time they grew tired,” Regis explained, prodding the red pieces he had placed on the map.

“Aha, I see,” Altina responded with a nod, sounding rather impressed.

“The moment you think you’ve gotten away, you’re suddenly surrounded by

enemies. Doesn't that seem like it would shatter their motivation to continue the battle? Having them surrender would result in the least number of casualties."

"But won't the battlefield devolve into chaos anyway, what with the fog?"

"Their shield and rifle combination only works when they can maintain their formation; we have the advantage when things are more disorganized."

"I see!"

"But still, the death count will only grow the longer the battle goes on. This was a plan to make the enemy surrender, but it looks like they didn't move at all until the Black Knight Brigade attacked."

"Is it possible they already left the camp?"

"I know the fog is thick, but I find it hard to believe our scouts missed the movement of ten thousand men..."

Regis couldn't say it was impossible, though. The fog dampened noise, meaning that while nearby things sounded louder as they reverberated through the dense water droplets, they became considerably harder to hear as they moved farther away. It was easy to delude the senses, but with so many wagons to move, it was surely an impossible feat.

"Yes... Impossible," Regis reassured himself. "After all, if they could manage something like that, it would be a far greater achievement than any new firearms." Not to mention they would almost certainly feel the vibrations through the ground if so many horses were on the move. Then there was the smell to consider, too.

Altina turned her gaze to the west. "But they're not doing what you expected. Right?"

"It happens all the time. I can prepare all the countermeasures I want, but not everything will go as planned. Especially considering that we're up against a foe I've never encountered before."

"Right. It's pretty common for someone to be completely different from how the rumors make them out to be."

“Yes. That is, as long as I’m not making some fatal oversight...” Regis muttered, staring intensely at the map.

All of a sudden, Altina turned and drew a sharp breath. “Regis! There’s an unfamiliar carriage coming from behind us!”

“Huh!?”

The lookout soldiers noticed too, albeit a brief moment later, and immediately became boisterous. One readied his spear and shouted, “Stop!”

What approached was a large carriage accompanied by two horsemen, both of whom Regis recognized as the designated guides. “It’s me!” one of them announced. “I brought the blacksmith!”

A bearded man built like a bear popped his head out and waved. “That’s me! I came to deliver an order for Princess Marie Quatre Argentina!”

“Enzo!” Regis shot up from his seat and rushed over.

“That carriage is my guest!” Altina declared. “Let them through!”

No sooner had she given the command than those who were blocking the carriage’s entry parted, stepping to either side like a massive human gate. The lookout soldiers returned their spears to an upright position and saluted.

The carriage had arrived from the west. Upon entering the camp, the two horsemen were the first to dismount, promptly kneeling before the princess.

“We have the blacksmith with us!”

“I’m sorry we’ve taken so long!”

One guide had been sent east to Rouenne, while the other had waited at their previous campsite following the Fourth Army’s relocation. The latter had been ordered to lead the blacksmith to them in the case that he arrived at the wrong destination, and it seemed he had properly fulfilled that duty.

“Thank you!” Altina said, returning a grateful salute.

The horsemen stood and took a step back, the relief clear on their faces. The carriage that followed had come to a reserved stop a short distance away.

They were currently situated atop a hill, their makeshift, open-air conference

room comprising little more than a table and chairs. It wasn't far from the various areas where they prepared food, repaired equipment, treated wounds, and allowed troops to rest.

The camp itself was surrounded by about five hundred combat-ready foot soldiers at any given moment, while a further thousand had been spread out and were keeping watch in teams of ten.

From where his carriage came to stop among the forces guarding the camp's rear, Enzo Bardot Smith stepped down under the watchful eyes of many soldiers. His fatigue was palpable, his drained expression and weary gait making it clear that the journey hadn't been an easy one, and upon reaching Altina, he stooped into a reverent bow.

"Your Highness, I am here to deliver your order."

"I really can't thank you enough. You did a commendable job, bringing it all this way through a dangerous war zone!"

"It is a sword, after all—a war zone is where it thrives. I only hope it's to your liking..."

"May I see it?"

"Of course."

With that, Altina made straight for the carriage.

Regis greeted Enzo with a modest bow. "I'm sorry for all the trouble. If only the war had ended just a little sooner..."

Enzo glanced around, then lowered his voice enough that the surrounding soldiers wouldn't be able to hear him. "How's the war looking, anyway? Please tell me Rouenne's gonna be okay."

"From what I've seen so far, it should be in the clear."

"But Rouenne's pretty close to the capital, right...? Truth is, I told the wife to take the kids and evacuate to my parents' place up north."

"I can't see my sis ever agreeing to that."

"Yeah, she wasn't having it. Immediately proclaimed: 'Leave it to Regis and

that princess. Everything'll be fine.' Maybe I'm just overthinking things, though. I mean, the Empire's never lost before."

"Granted, we've lost quite a few battles this time around... But that should end here, so long as the First Army holds out," Regis concluded. Upon noticing the increasingly concerned look on Enzo's face, he attempted to reassure him with a simple, "No need to worry."

The two began to follow Altina over to the carriage, when out of nowhere, she leaped back.

"Wha—!?"

"Haaah!"

Someone pounced out from inside the carriage with a longsword in hand, swinging down upon the young princess. Not a single soldier could process the move in time to react, with Altina alone moving to block. Drawing the sword at her hip in one smooth motion, she successfully locked the lethal blow before it could touch her. A shrill, metallic shriek pierced the air.

But it didn't stop there—the mysterious attacker unleashed strike after strike.

"Here! There! Take this!"

"Kh... Tss... Hah! Hyaaah!"

Skillfully using her own longsword to parry each attack, Altina countered with a horizontal swipe. The tip of her blade grazed the man's brown robe, at which point he appeared to momentarily back away. Then, both parties closed in once again, only this time...

They cordially clasped hands with one another.

"Balthazar! Long time no see! Glad you could make it!"

"I see you're as sharp as ever, Argentina!"

Altina gleefully smiled while the old man let out a dry laugh. The guard soldiers surrounding them were frozen in place with their spears in hand, the bemused looks on their faces making it very clear they had no idea what had just happened.

Regis, however, immediately hurried over to the brown-robed man. “U-Um... Are you perhaps... the former duke, Balthazar Basil de Balzac?”

“The very same!” the old man proclaimed, speaking with such enthusiasm that saliva flew from his mouth. Altina was standing beside him, now holding his hand and swinging her arm like a rejoicing child. Her other hand, meanwhile, was still firmly grasping her sword.

Regis sighed. “Could you please restrain yourself...? You were moments away from being stormed by our guards.”

“Dying in a hail of spears? I could hardly ask for more!” Balthazar declared with a proud grin. Altina was nodding along with him, fully convinced.

You really shouldn't agree with a statement like that...

“What’s more—Princess, you’re in front of the soldiers.”

“Oh, you’re right.”

It was perhaps a little late now, but she straightened her back, tightened her expression, and sheathed her sword. Balthazar tucked his blade away as well.

“*Ahem.* This gentleman here is the former duke of House Balzac. I’m sure you’ve heard of him. He is also the princess’s sword instructor,” Regis explained to the flustered guards.

Only then did they lower their spears. House Balzac had performed so brilliantly in the wars that founded the nation that they were named the First Emperor’s right hand. As a prestigious noble house revered enough to have been granted one of the Empire’s treasured swords, it was understandable that its esteemed former duke had been hired to teach the princess.

Enzo’s shocked expression settled with a relieved sigh. “Hah... For a second there, I was worried that I’d brought an enemy with me.”

“If she hadn’t reacted so quickly, then she very well might have lost her head! Kahahah!” the old master exclaimed, accompanying his unthinkable statement with a hearty laugh. Altina happily chuckled alongside him.

The way Regis saw it, there was something a little strange about how these two perceived the world—it was as though they were letting their muscles do

the thinking for them. Try as he might, he simply couldn't comprehend such an unusual mindset.

All this aside, for the man to have willingly come all the way to the battlefield, he must have had some sort of aim. "Um... Sir Balthazar, what brings you to the west?" Regis asked.

"Oh, nothing important. I simply heard through the grapevine that Argentina was bested by a mercenary."

"Erk!" Altina's expression was tinged with embarrassment.

"I hear that you lost."

"Th-That's... Well... She avoided my attack, my sword got embedded in a tree, and my hands went numb, so—"

"Blah, blah, blah. I didn't ask what happened, or how she got the drop on you. None of that matters. Did you lose?"

"...Yeah," she conceded with a nod, nervously biting her lip.

Balthazar let out a deep sigh. "That's no good... No good at all... How you use your sword isn't important, but you *must* win, regardless of what you're up against. If you're outnumbered, your opponent is stronger than you, or you're staring down the barrel of a hundred guns, resort to whatever means you have to. A loss on the battlefield means certain death, and you won't achieve anything if you die."

"I know that..." Altina said, turning her gaze to the carriage. "That's why I had my sword repaired."

With that, Enzo gave a firm nod. "Let me fetch it for you."

Together with his apprentice, he brought down the casket-like crate. It was fastened shut, and to open it, they would need to carefully remove each nail one by one. The cabman cautiously peeked out as they worked, watching from among the shadows of the canopy.

Balthazar's eyes narrowed. "Hm, hm... So you're the blacksmith she entrusted the emperor's sword to?"

"I am. Though we're about to see whether or not I met her expectations... In

fact, I share in your surprise, sir. You're the princess's sword instructor, are you?"

"Instructor? Nay! Her friend! I've never taught her a thing!"

Altina nodded. "He has a point. We've always just sparred with one another."

"And I haven't lost once!"

"Eh!? I've won *three times*!"

"Bah! Says you!" the old man retorted, almost sounding like a child.

Continuing to pull nails from the crate, Enzo turned to his apprentice. "People learn by example. In the world of smithery, they're what you'd call a master and pupil," he said, gesturing toward the bickering duo.

"Hahah..." Lionel responded with a wry laugh.

A few more nails were removed until, eventually, the coffin lid came free.

Regis's plan was proceeding exactly as expected. Now that they had the treasured sword, they simply needed to await the results from Jerome and his men, subjugate the enemy supply unit, and then send a message to the capital that the Fourth Army was on its way.

So long as that information reached the feuding forces at Fort Boneire, the war would be over. No matter how powerful High Britannia's guns and cannons were, Latrielle had over forty thousand men at his disposal; it was hard to imagine he would fall in half a month.

A warm breeze stroked Regis's nape.



Through the fog crept death incarnate.

The soldiers on lookout encountered it before anyone else, their foe moving so silently that they initially had no idea what was going on. The first man perished without resistance, or even any last words—all of a sudden, there was blood pouring from his neck, staining the undergrowth a deep red. He was still standing at ease, having not even raised the spear in his hand. Perhaps he

hadn't even realized what had happened.

Before the corpse stood a man in black, a large trident in his hand.

More and more of these black-clad soldiers emerged from the fog like seeping darkness. Their weapons and armor varied wildly in appearance—spears, swords, bows, sickles, canes, and even bizarrely shaped blades never before seen in Belgaria. But they were all unified by their black robes and the stench of blood that clung to them.

“One hundred kills each...” growled the man with the trident. “Cut open a path!”

The black-clad group set upon the other troops before the man had even finished. The Empire's soldiers were not known to be weak, however.

“It's the enemy! Mercenaries! They're...!”

The next man noticed the encroaching foes in time to raise his spear, but his sight was almost immediately blocked out by something metallic.

“Wha—!?”

“Hrryah!”

Coupled with a heroic cry, the mass of metal bent the soldier's spear beyond use before promptly caving in his skull. A large man was swinging about an equally large hammer.

As more of their weapons were broken, the other soldiers took a step back.

“What's up with this guy...!? He's like a tornado!”

“Don't draw back! The princess is behind us! We must stop them here!”

“Ghh... I-It's time to show them the strength of the Empire!”

They cast down their ruined spears and drew their swords, but a sudden attack shattered them all so quickly that one might have assumed they were broken from the start. The culprit was a massive sword of a peculiar make, the blade of which grew wider and wider toward the tip before curving back like a large fin.

Some said that High Britannia had imported eastern weapons along with their

tea. Was this one of them?

A slender man with narrow eyes glared at them, raising an unusual cry as he pounced. “Houuu... Hyaaah! Chaaah! Ryaaah!”

Despite its bizarre shape, the sword was surprisingly sharp—that, or its wielder sported tremendous strength. Not only were the imperial weapons bisected with ease, but the men holding them as well. Flesh, bone, and tendons were cleaved in a single swipe, sliced through as easily as a tender cut of meat.

Belgarian soldiers were known to be undefeated in close combat, and yet, one by one, their lifeless bodies dropped to the ground.

Led by Mercenary King Gilbert, three hundred Renard Pendu elites had used the fog to launch an ambush. They were revered as the strongest mercenaries around, and their overwhelming individual might allowed them to easily tear through the imperial army’s defensive forces.

However, the soldiers of the Empire weren’t going to back down so easily. The country had been in a constant state of war since before the time of their great-grandfathers; these men were raised knowing they would be sent into battle at least once in their lives.

All of a sudden, the mercenaries were intercepted from the side. A well-built soldier brandished his spear, leading along ten subordinates.

“We are the 109th spearmen division! We’ll teach the enemy a lesson, even at the cost of our lives! Everybody, charge!”

“Hraaaaaaaaaah!”

“Houuu... Graaah!”

The mercenary sliced through the oncoming spears with a powerful slash, cutting the throat of each spearman on the return swing. But another row of soldiers lay in wait behind them, grazing their deceased allies’ flanks as they thrust their own weapons forward.

“Die!”

“Guh!?”

The warped blade fell from the mercenary’s hand as a spear plunged into his

torso. A second spear shortly followed, then a third.

“Charge! *Charge!*” the head of the spearmen screamed, lunging toward another mercenary in the process. His attack was deftly avoided, however, and an enemy glaive pierced through his stomach. “Gff—!? Grrraah!”

No sooner had the captain been impaled than he tossed down his spear. He had accepted death the very moment his attack missed, and with his remaining strength, he clung to the weapon shaft protruding from his body.

“Glory to Belgaria!”

The mercenary looked up, dumbstruck. With his weapon secured in place, he was unable to pull away. The other soldiers took this opportunity to swarm him with their spears.

There was no denying that Renard Pendu were a force to be reckoned with, but they only totaled three hundred; in a drawn-out battle, it was inconceivable that the Empire’s five thousand would lose. Or at least, that would have been the case under normal circumstances.

The Fourth Army’s chain of command was still a mess; of the five thousand men guarding the camp, only around half were from the former Beilschmidt border regiment, with the rest being remnants of the Second Army, or private reinforcements sent by lords to aid the nation in its time of crisis. Among these numbers were youths, passionately driven but largely untrained; old soldiers dragged back from retirement; and nobles who had joined for the sake of appearances alone.

What’s more, Belgaria had just reorganized its forces. Many of the remaining soldiers had never before trained together, and rather than the chaos of the battlefield, it was this lack of drilling that seemed to impede their ability to move together. Some were so worked up that orders simply passed them by, others arbitrarily made choices based on their own experiences, while still others were too fearful to move at all.

As a result, what should have been an easy enough battle ended up very much the opposite—the outer defenses collapsed, with the reinforcements charging in far too late. In the blink of an eye, those tasked with guarding the main camp dropped to the bloody earth...

And before Altina stood the man with the trident.



Ten paces remained between them. How many had he killed to get here? His once-black robe was stained red all the way to its outer hems as though he had raced through a downpour of blood, and chunks of seeping flesh clung fast to the weapon in his hand.

The man smiled like a beast. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, princess of the Empire.”

“A three-pointed spear... You must be Gilbert Schweinzeberg, the Mercenary King.”

Altina drew the sword at her hip. She had guards, but Gilbert had come with four others who looked exceptionally skilled.

“How could this be...?” As his own failings dawned on him, Regis’s entire body started to tremble. In his mind, he was begging for the earth to swallow him up.

To think he would attack a camp five thousand strong with less than a thousand men himself...

“Princess,” Gilbert began, “you’ll be coming with me. I’ll trade your safety for our supplies.”

“You really consider my life of equal value to the Empire’s future? No one in their right mind would accept that deal.”

“That’s something... Well, we won’t know unless we try.”

There were plenty of ways to break a person, and Altina was quite a powerful unifying force. Were she to be tortured into ordering that High Britannia’s supplies be returned to them, what would the result be? Someone like Jerome would never concede to such a command, but what of the other soldiers? Perhaps they would follow it, meaning there was a chance Gilbert could reclaim what they had worked so hard to secure.

Regis cursed his naivety. *They must’ve decided to capture our commander when the fog started setting in...* With five thousand defending the main camp, he had considered this impossible to achieve. But the enemy had broken

through so easily. He had taken Renard Pendu too lightly.

Not to mention, he had definitely failed to judge the newly incorporated soldiers properly. Belgian troops were revered for their strength, but that wasn't to say every man he scraped together was a great warrior. He had failed to use his forces to the fullest.

While it would mean the former Second Army's soldiers would hog all the glory, he should have fortified his defenses entirely with the soldiers of the Border regiment. What's more, had Regis possessed even the slightest sense for martial prowess, perhaps he would have realized that the soldiers he'd taken in wouldn't be able to fight off the mercenaries.

There had been so many options at Regis's disposal, and yet he failed nonetheless.

Gilbert slowly approached, his trident resting across his shoulders. "There's one thing I want to ask you... The weather. We always keep an eye on it, and you don't get fog under these conditions. What did you do?"

Altina wiped away a bead of sweat trickling down her brow; simply confronting the Mercenary King had made her considerably tense. "Our strategist is a magician," she answered.

"Oh, really? I see... When I was looking at the ground on the way here, I noticed something—wet and dry patches. Maybe you splashed a large volume of water all over the place. Magic, eh?"

"So you already figured it out..."

"In which case, I can understand all those half-assed raids last night. Your goal was to keep us at camp, lest we spot one of your folks spreading the water about."

At that, the princess remained silent.

Gilbert nodded, taking her lack of denial as an affirmative. "That's quite something. Your strategist... Regis d'Aurick, was it?"

The Mercenary King scanned the camp, looking from the guards around Altina to Enzo and his apprentice. Finally, his eyes stopped on Regis.

“You.”

“Eep. Y-Yes, sir?”

He guessed correctly on the first try. Had Franziska mentioned what he looked like? Or was he too gangly to even pass as a soldier?

Gilbert broke into a smile. “Kuahahah! I see! So *you’re* Regis!”

“Can I... Can I help you...?”

“You actually outsmarted me! When it comes to strategy, this is the first time I’ve been so thoroughly bested. To think, you’ve got a bloke who can make fog at will. You really are a magician!”

Despite the man’s laughter, Regis couldn’t feel even a hint of amicability from him. This was more akin to a sneer from the devil himself, causing a chill to shoot down his spine.

“I schemed to ensure it wouldn’t come to this—to make sure the Mercenary King didn’t reach the princess. If we’re talking about strategy, this is unequivocally my loss,” Regis replied, desperately trying not to pass out on the spot.

“Yeah, I get where you’re coming from. If you’ve got five thousand combatants defending the place, you normally wouldn’t expect someone to reach you, right? Well, that’s where you’re wrong, kiddo. Battles aren’t all about numbers.”

“To think the poor drilling of our soldiers would cause such a dire situation...”

“Oh, c’mon. Drilling? That ain’t it, either!”

“Pardon?”

Gilbert flourished his trident, then pointed it toward Altina. “What do you think decides a battle? The answer is willpower!” he declared, glaring at her with bloodshot eyes.

“You’ve got that right!” Altina exclaimed, readying her own weapon. “I left everything to Regis and didn’t consider how my soldiers felt. This is *my* failure. I sat back just because we had so many on our side.”

“Well said, Princess. You failed. Now, it’s time for you to pay the price!”

“What are you talking about, Mercenary King? The price was allowing you to stand before me.”

“Oh?”

“I am a princess of *Belgaria*! Don’t think I’ll simply do as you please!”

“Kuahahah! Very gallant of you! I don’t hate the thought of trampling a noble’s dignity before making them beg for their life. I’ll strip you bare and have you nailed to a cross, Princess!”

“How vulgar!”

Gilbert suddenly kicked off the ground, the undergrowth beneath him shooting up into the air as though his legs had exploded. He closed the distance at speeds unthinkable for a human, and while the guard soldiers reached out their weapons in an attempt to block his path, they were being held back by the four other mercenaries.

Unimpeded by the incoming spears, Gilbert closed in. His trident shot toward Altina’s eyes, but she twisted her body to avoid it.

“Try again!”

“Bwahah! Is that supposed to be a dodge!?”

Like a twisting snake, the trident homed in on her. For Gilbert to have changed his weapon’s course mid-thrust, his might must have been extraordinary.

Altina blocked the attack with her longsword. “Not a problem!”

“Then have another!”

He drew his spear back instantaneously, only to thrust again the second one normally would have retreated. What followed was the shrill clash of metal as Altina managed to catch the trident with her blade. Had she been a moment later, its prongs would have skewered her arm.

“I’m in a rush!” Gilbert roared. “I’ve got no time to play around!”

“Kuh!?”

The Mercenary King lunged forward again. Despite how closely Regis was watching them, he was barely able to perceive the next attack; Gilbert stabbed at Altina so many times in such quick succession that he could no longer keep up. It was either the same speed or faster than what he had seen from Jerome.

The ear-jarring screech of metal resounded through the air.

Regis thought for a moment. He was useless. He had failed miserably. He would accept the blame and take any punishment awaiting him. But that was a matter for later—right now, he needed to do whatever he could to help.

Gilbert's objective is to capture Altina; he gains nothing by killing her. Plus, he and his men would end up surrounded by five thousand soldiers thirsty for vengeance. He'll probably do anything to take her alive.

“‘Probably’ isn’t good enough... I need to be certain,” Regis muttered, shaking his head. He couldn’t fail again, and so he decided to make his hypothesis loud and clear. “Gilbert’s aiming to take the princess’s sword!”

“I admit it! But knowing that isn’t going to help you!” he growled, continuing his intense barrage. But Altina didn’t run. Instead, she gritted her teeth and endured each strike.

“Khh...!”

Even as someone who didn’t know the first thing about martial arts, Regis could tell that Altina was reaching her limit. But if she wanted to become empress—the person who shouldered the very Empire itself—she couldn’t turn tail and flee from a mercenary. This was an overwhelming clash of willpower and technique, and as things were going now, it would end just as Gilbert wanted it to.

The sword in Altina’s hand let out a sharp noise as its blade suddenly sheared.

“What!? How did you break it so quickly!?”

She had managed to block the strikes aimed at her body, but now she had no means by which to fend off any further attacks.

A fearless smile crossed Gilbert’s face. “Ha-hah! The tips of my trident are forged from the faerie silver trystie!”

“Huh!?”

“Let’s start... by breaking an arm!”

As she was now, Altina had nothing to block the oncoming horizontal sweep...

But, at the very last moment, a man wearing a fluttering brown robe leapt in the trident’s path. Balthazar. He slid back on his feet as he caught the heavy stroke.

“Phew. I see. This one’s strong...”

“Wha—!? Balthazar!?”

“Argentina... Is that slender blade really your weapon of choice? The blacksmith awaits you.”

“B-But... in a one-on-one duel...”

There was no time to dawdle. Regis ran over to the princess as well, stopping close enough to grab her by the shoulder. He was now well within Gilbert’s range.

“Altina!”

“Regis!? Why are you out here when you can’t even wield a sword!? When even a hamster could defeat you!?”

Harsh, but accurate. Even with Balthazar holding the Mercenary King back for now, just knowing that he was within the range of that trident made not only Regis’s knees but his entire body want to give out. But he couldn’t run away alone.

“I-I came here to persuade you...” he said, his voice quavering in terror as he spoke. “Altina, is your goal to be a master swordsman? Or an empress who leads the people?”

“What!? An empress!”

“In that case, rather than fighting fair and falling as a swordsman, shouldn’t you seek victory by whatever means!? To protect the country!?”

“Gh...!”

Regis’s time to convince Altina was running out. The Mercenary King once

again swung his trident at Balthazar.

“Out of my way, old man! You’ll strain your back playing with anything bigger than a cat!”

“Hah!”

Gilbert must have been holding back when fighting Altina, so as not to kill her. He let out a flurry of swipes and thrusts, moving so quickly that they appeared to land almost simultaneously. Balthazar, however, parried each one as though he knew where it would be in advance.

“Kuhah! What joy!” Gilbert roared as he stepped closer. “I didn’t think I’d find someone other than the Black Knight who could parry my attacks! Let alone an old codger like you!”

“You scoundrel! Why work as a mercenary with such skill under your belt!? Become a knight! Protect a nation! Protect its people!”

“My *brigade* is my country! I protect *them*, and don’t you forget it! I don’t need a lecture! And I can’t let the princess get away!”

Another ferocious thrust. Balthazar attempted to parry, but the sheer force knocked him to the ground. He could no longer get up. His breathing was ragged, but there was a broad smile on his face. “Hah... Hah... What a pity... If only I was twenty years younger...”

His right arm—that is, his sword-wielding arm—was bent from the wrist at a frightening angle. It was very clearly broken.

Gilbert raised his trident high into the air. And then—

“58th spearmen division, get behind him!” Altina shouted. “59th through 80th divisions, don’t let the other mercenaries get close!”

The soldiers in combat scattered and disjointed, reorganizing on her order. Troops armed with guns following close behind her, Altina stepped forth, a new sword in her hands.



Gilbert frowned. “What’s this? Has the fear of death led to a sudden change of heart? I heard the Empire’s fourth princess was fixated on fighting fair and

square.”

“So my personality was factored into your plan.”

“Naturally. You’re the one I’m at war with.”

“No need to worry... I’m not going to use my men as shields.”

The massive scabbard slipped away, laying bare the treasured sword. Compared to before it had been sheared, the hilt was completely different: there was a massive weight at the pommel, almost like a hammer; it had been stripped of any excessive ornamentation; and the parts were now considerably thicker. According to Enzo, they had also changed the materials used, ensuring they were harder and heavier this time around.

Having been given a polish, the wide blade glimmered an even brighter silver than before. Altina saw her reflection in its surface so vividly that she could count her own eyelashes.

She turned her gaze to Gilbert, meeting her foe with a sharp glare. “I’m going to become empress, and to that end, I can’t lose. No matter what. I must accept help to buy time. And should my sword break, I shall fight on with a new one. I’ll take my strategist’s advice as well.”



Gilbert shrugged. “Wasn’t sticking to a one-on-one duel what got you accepted as commander in the first place?”

“I’ll have to ask my soldiers. After I’ve beaten you, that is!”

Altina rushed forth without a moment’s hesitation, lunging forward with her massive sword. With the spearmen closing in behind him, Gilbert couldn’t simply draw back to avoid the attack. Instead, he attempted to strike it down with his trident.

However, as it came into contact with the new *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*, the polearm let out a painful grating noise. The fact that only its prongs were made of trystie put the Mercenary King at a clear disadvantage.

He gritted his teeth. “The rest won’t hold up for long... But no matter how splendid your sword might be, its weight means you won’t be able to keep up with my attacks!”

Gilbert prepared to begin another flurry of strikes—the same technique he had used to break Altina’s longsword moments ago.

“Don’t swing! Deflect!” Balthazar cried out, still resting on the ground.

Altina nodded. Rather than attempting to knock away the oncoming trident, she turned her blade so that its flat would redirect the first blow. The moment the weapon made contact, she nudged it aside, pivoting the sword around where she was gripping the hilt. That slight motion alone was enough for the pommel to quickly change places with the blade, drawing a massive arc through the air.

“Ngh!” Gilbert hurriedly retracted his trident, ceasing his attack. Meanwhile, Altina was taken aback by her own success.

“Oh, I see. That’s why it’s so big... Even with such a slight hand movement, the resulting slash is tremendous. Before, it was so top-heavy that every attack dragged my body along with it.”

“Kh... Not yet!”

Gilbert attempted to stab Altina again, but to no avail—she pivoted her sword to move its cross guard, scraping away at her opponent’s weapon in the

process. Rather than swordsmanship, it was closer to manipulating the helm of a ship.

Had Gilbert been armed with a weapon that could stand up to even the Empire's treasured sword, perhaps he would have changed his approach. But he had never before fought against someone who could block his thrusts and damage his trident in a single move. Unlike before, when Altina would use momentum and sheer force to hammer her foes into submission, she could now corner him simply by keeping up her guard.

Countless cracks ran down the shaft of the Mercenary King's trident. The battle with Renard Pendu was surely coming to a close; no matter how strong they were individually, neither their stamina nor their weapons could endure a battle against more than ten times their numbers. Once they were worn thin and their weapons broken, each mercenary would either be killed, taken prisoner, or surrender.

Gilbert was evidently no exception when it came to accumulating fatigue—his movements were becoming increasingly sluggish. But even then, he twirled his trident in a grand flourish.

"I can't lose, for their sakes!" he declared. "Have at you!"

"I need to win to change the Empire!" Altina cried in turn, swinging her sword in turn. "Haaah!"

A furious wind swept over the two as they met, the grass scattering beneath them. The silver blade struck the bloodstained trident, and...

The trident shattered.

Once Gilbert had lost his weapon, the soldiers forming a wall behind him stuck out their spears. He squatted down on the spot, completely resigned. His eyes were closed and his back straightened, as though signaling for them to finish him already.

The soldiers let out an almighty cheer, a ripple of joy spreading through their ranks. What they had sought—what they had longed for—was a leader who would guide them to victory. Their voices, extolling both the princess and the Empire, spread far and wide across the highlands.

Regis sighed. The wind continued to blow, and when he looked into the distance, he could vaguely make out sunlight and the outline of a hill.

“The fog’s clearing...”

Chapter 4: Imperial Abdication

June 6th, early morning—

Latrielle glared down from the watchtower as the High Britannian vanguard closed in on Fort Boneire. His vision had recovered enough that he could now get through each day without assistance, though not enough for him to be able to fully grasp the situation below. From so high up, he could not even make out the enemy's numbers.

The fact that Latrielle was stuck in such close quarters with his soldiers and staff officers meant he needed to use his wit to keep his failing eyesight concealed. To this end, he supplemented the vague shapes he could see with Germain's purposely detailed explanations.

"My, Sir Latrielle, what do you think they're doing with thirty cannons? Have they grown irritated, seeing that their long-range bombardments had no effect?"

"We can only hope it's something so benign."

"Shield-bearing soldiers and riflemen... There look to be around two thousand in total. That's the same formation they used to take out the Seventh Army, too. Even if we charge straight at them, I imagine we'll have a hard time pushing them back."

"Indeed," the prince nodded, pretending to examine the enemy troops. In reality, he was arranging his thoughts solely around Germain's verbal explanation—a combination of what was going on below and his own advice as a staff officer. "What do you think about the movements of their main force?" he asked, taking care to keep his question indirect.

"It certainly is conspicuous that they've started rearranging their shields and riflemen since the vanguard made its move, but nothing else seems to stand out... Perhaps they don't intend to expose their main force to danger, but I have to admit, their measures seem considerably half-baked."

The High Britannian Army was allegedly under the command of Oswald Coulthard. He was a man who nonchalantly employed measures that were far from humane, but it was believed he had very little experience in actual wars—High Britannia rarely waged them with foreign powers, and there hadn't been any large-scale civil wars in quite some time.

Latrielle had made his resolve. *Now it's my turn, vile serpent.*

“Deploy the twenty thousand we have outside the fort on our right flank, and open the south gate. We will make it seem as though we are preparing to charge, but this is simply a diversion. Ensure our men are at no point within the range of enemy rifles. We shall send our cavalry from behind—from the north gate—and have them ambush the vanguard from the left. If we can force the enemy into a position where they must protect themselves on three sides, their defenses will inevitably weaken.”

“Understood, sir!”

There would still be casualties—that much was inevitable. But if they allowed the enemy to come much closer with their cannons, there was a chance that the next bombardment would succeed in breaching the fortress's stone walls.

Fort Boneire was not equipped with very many cannons itself, which meant it was possible they would fail to crush their advancing opponent in an exchange of gunfire. Even in the case that they *were* able to destroy the enemy's thirty cannons, doing so might cost the First Army their defensive walls, placing them at a considerably greater disadvantage when it came to holding their position for the required duration. Exchanging some cavalry for thirty cannons, however, was not such a bad trade.

Latrielle turned his gaze to the distance. He was still unable to see, but each day, he awaited the arrival of an urgent notice from the west. If Argentina's Fourth Army could sever High Britannia's supply chain...

“No word from her yet,” Germain said, having followed the prince's gaze.

Latrielle exhaled deeply. “If she does manage it, we'll have a lot more options.”

“Anything is better than being stuck on the defensive. It would do something

for our declining morale, too. But the enemy should withdraw before we're forced to resort to anything drastic."

"Yes, they're not foolish enough to wait until the very last moment, when their ammunition has run out, to begin their retreat."

"They could always fool us into thinking they have more bullets than they actually do."

"A pointless endeavor. Once their men learn of the situation, we'll immediately start to see deserters. And with twenty thousand troops, they can't prevent such information from leaking out," Latrielle replied, closing his eyes to give them a brief moment of reprieve.

"Still..." Germain groaned. "Can the Fourth Army really win?"

"They already did at sea."

An express message announcing the defeat of the Queen's Navy had previously arrived. The issue was that, by the time the port was secured, ten thousand supply carriers under the command of the Mercenary King had already departed.

The battle between Gilbert and the Fourth Army should be over by now. But it took a little over two days for even the fastest horse to make it from western La Frengé to Fort Boneire.

Germain lowered his voice. "Say they lose..."

"Then we'll have to go out and meet the enemy. If we wait until they join with the Mercenary King and reclaim their supplies, our chances of victory will grow even slimmer. We'll need to scatter the forces here, then fight back the supply unit alone."

"That... Yes, that does sound like the only option..."

"Indeed," Latrielle said with an inaudible sigh. It was chaotic enough just thinking about it.

If only they had one more month, they could call troops from the Empire's outermost regions to form an even greater army. This, of course, came with its own risks—every war front had deliberately been left with enough troops to

fend off any potential advances, so bringing men from these provincial regions risked them getting occupied. But even then...

“Can a princess beat a king?” was the main question on the mind of every officer in the First Army. The majority had already concluded that it wasn’t likely, to the point that the common soldier was already starting to wonder, *“What plan will Latrielle come up with once High Britannia’s supplies arrive?”*

The Empire’s First Army had remained undefeated thus far, and while they had fallen victim to a surprise attack, they hadn’t necessarily lost. Was it not only logical that they would win again? Naturally, such optimistic notions did not go unopposed—many had grown pessimistic following the incineration of the White Wolf Brigade, as well as the defeats of the Second and Seventh Armies.

The bray of a horse dragged Latrielle from his thoughts.

“Our White Hare Brigade has gone out on the right flank!” Germain exclaimed, pointing down below.

“Good.”

The First Army boasted three knight brigades, with the White Hares being revered for their speedy horses.

“The Seventh Army’s cavalry is also leaving through the front.”

Second-grade combat officer Coignière had only fifty horsemen at his command. The Seventh Army had never had many to begin with, and now this was all that remained. As the enemy would need to look uphill to see them, however, they could easily disguise their lacking numbers; there were foot soldiers armed with long spears standing behind the cavalry, making them seem like a force that couldn’t be ignored.

As expected, the enemy vanguard rearranged its shields and riflemen in preparation to meet them.

The hooves of the White Hares’ horses thundered as they advanced from the right, making sure to keep their distance and firing only warning shots. The Seventh Army likewise readied their spears and stomped the earth, pretending to ready for a charge.

One beat behind, a separate cavalry unit ambushed the enemy from the left. They were the Sun Knights, led by Lieutenant General Buxerou of the Third Army. Faster than the wind, they plunged straight into the High Britannian vanguard, paying no mind to the gunshots and cannonfire tearing toward them from the enemy's main camp. Their horsemen began dropping like flies and yet they continued forward, as unwavering as an arrow shot from a bow.

The officers surrounding Latrielle cheered at the sight.

"The Third Army's cavalry is being visibly whittled away by only two thousand foes..." Germain whispered. "This confirms it: we'll suffer immense losses if we send our men directly at their main force."

"Indeed."

At present, Latrielle had close to four thousand horsemen under him—a force that would usually be able to overwhelm any opponent. Losing more than half that number in a frontal charge, however, would make it considerably harder to maintain the Empire's army henceforth.

Indeed, winning was not the only objective.

"Regardless, it appears the plan is a success, my lord."

"A small success."

"Admittedly. But as our men were becoming increasingly pessimistic, this victory will surely provide them a great boost in courage!"

Overhearing this remark, the other officers watching the battle exchanged words of general agreement.

His vision hazy, Latrielle watched as the fuzzy contours of the enemy's vanguard began to crumble. "Hm...?" He rubbed his eyes in disbelief.

"Oh, it seems the enemy is falling back—rather, they are fleeing entirely! This is undoubtedly a great success for the Sun Knights; High Britannia's command fell apart the moment they realized they were no match for them!"

"Don't chase them. We've prevented a point-blank cannon barrage. That's enough."

"Yes, sir!"

These orders were conveyed to those below using flag signals. For a moment, Latrielle feared that the Sun Knights might continue to rush forward, thirsting for glory... but Buxerou promptly reined them in, keeping his men well away from the enemy's main forces.

Once again, the officers let out joyous cheers. Germain seemed excited as well.

"My lord! Lieutenant General Buxerou has managed to capture the enemy's cannons! If we couple those with the height advantage of our position, then they won't be able to approach us!"

"Right..."

"Hm? Is something the matter?"

"They willingly divided their forces, and their response to our cavalry charge was conveniently shoddy... When considered alongside the fact they abandoned their cannons instead of destroying them, do you not think something strange is afoot?"

Latrielle considered his opponent Oswald to be a venomous serpent. He knew the man was a sly one, and so he couldn't wipe away the suspicion that this was somehow a trap.

Germain cocked his head to one side. "Do you think they're rigged to explode?"

"I wonder..."

"We'll give them a thorough inspection once we've fully secured them."

"As you should."

Whatever the case, gunpowder did not pose a threat unless it was ignited, and it would certainly be hard to miss any lit fuses. The imperial army used cannons as well, and so they knew how to handle them with care.

Even as the enemy vanguard retreated, the bombardment from High Britannia's main camp continued. Belgian casualties continued to rise as Latrielle's men became easier targets, the heavy cannons considerably slowing their movement speed... but what they were due to gain would be worth more

than double their losses.

A great many soldiers gathered at the front gate to welcome High Britannia's latest cannons—the Type-41 Elswicks. It wasn't long before the crowd erupted in cheers, singing the praises of Lieutenant General Buxerou and his Sun Knights. By this point, the White Hares and remnants of the Seventh Army had already returned to their barracks.

So long as they used these captured goods well, Belgaria could turn the war to their advantage. The soldiers lugged the massive cannons through the gate, making sure to bring the barrels of gunpowder and ammunition, cart and all.

Then, through the enthusiastic roars, a bugle sounded.

It came from High Britannia's camp, but what could it mean? The enemy neither charged nor changed formation, yet even in the absence of any movement, the high-pitched sound continued to blare.

Germain stared out across the battlefield in total bemusement. “N-Nothing's happening... What are they—”

All of a sudden, a blinding flash stole his vision. Had the fortress been struck by lightning? The abrupt impact threw the standing soldiers into the air.

“Gah!?” Germain let out a sharp gasp as he was knocked backward, dropping to the ground.

Latrielle had managed to stay upright, but the bright light only intensified the pain in his eyes. “Nngh...” He pressed against them with his thumb and index finger, and it was only then that he realized—were his ears now failing him, too? The worrying silence seemed to drag on forever, until eventually, a far-off voice seemed to reach him.

“...lord!”

“Hm...?”

“My lord!”

“Germain...? Are you all right?”

“I-I am! *I'm* all right, but... not everyone was so lucky. Many seem to have damaged their eyes and ears, and a few sustained hip injuries from the impact.”

Those closest to the window appeared to have suffered the most; a few men groaned in pain as they writhed around on the floor.

Much to his own relief, Latrielle's hearing was slowly coming back to him. Given his already poor condition, had he gone deaf as well, the war would have been as good as over.

"What happened?"

Germain clasped the ledge of the tower window and propped himself up. But as he began to assess the situation below, the color drained from his face.

"No...! My lord... The g-gate has... collapsed."

"What? I don't understand what you mean."

"It's as if we faced an onslaught of a thousand cannons. It's all... Everything's been entirely reduced to rubble. The soldiers who were gathered, and the Sun Knights, they're... they're nowhere to be seen! It's as barren as a desert down there! There's nothing but smoke!" Germain replied, becoming more and more panicked to the point that he was practically wailing.

Latrielle was dumbfounded. "It was a trap after all..."

"What!?"

"Something triggered the gunpowder to explode. I don't fully understand it, but it must have been the bugle."

"The bugle...?"

"It's a terrifying thought, but... perhaps they had someone hiding inside one of their ammunition barrels, underneath the shells."

"That's absurd! If they did that, then..."

"...*the person who started the explosion would be blown away too,*" Germain had wanted to say, but he quickly found himself unable to speak. He knew—they *all* knew—that there were people who would follow orders without question, even if doing so cost them their lives. Was it loyalty? Faith? Familial honor? No one could say. But at times, a mission was valued more than one's own life.

Latrielle grit his teeth. "He got us... His objective was to make us bring those

explosives back into the fort.”

“How callous can one man be...?”

There were commanders who ordered their men to charge, knowing that death was more than likely; superior officers who meted out harsh punishments to unsuccessful subordinates; and soldiers who wildly fired their weapons when a battle turned chaotic, taking out friend and foe alike. But this was the first time Latrielle had come up against a commander who would order a mission where even success resulted in certain death.

He closed his eyes. Anger. Irritation. Fear. He needed to swallow his emotions and calmly analyze the situation. Allowing himself to get flustered would cost him the war.

When Latrielle finally opened his eyes again, he was glaring straight at the enemy. The smoke was beginning to clear, and he could tell that the faint black haze at the bottom of the hill was slowly advancing upon them.

“They don’t seem to be charging... Are they that convinced of victory? No, much the opposite—they’re wary. I see. They don’t yet have a grasp on how bad our casualties are.”

“I see,” Germain replied with a nod.

Latrielle turned his back to the window. “As a tactician, I am second-rate. But as a knight, I don’t intend to lose to anyone. Those who can stand, grab a spear! Anyone who can move, follow me! We’ll show them the true pride of the Empire!”

“He’s going into battle! His Highness is going into battle!”

The surrounding men picked up their spears and stood, a tinge of color returning to their pale faces.

“Oh, the prince!?”

“It’s time to show them just how strong we are!”

“High Britannia’s gonna get more than it bargained for!”

As word quickly spread through the fort that Latrielle was headed to the front lines, the officers who had just moments ago resigned themselves to defeat

mounted their horses with weapons in hand.

In no time at all, a little over thirteen thousand soldiers amassed in front of what had once been the gate. The attack on the enemy's vanguard and the subsequent explosion had put seven thousand out of commission—seven thousand soldiers and the gate to their fortress, for a mere thirty cannons.

Once again, Latrielle reaffirmed that he wasn't well suited to stratagem. When it came to deception, his foe was a cut above the rest, and protecting a fortress without a gate seemed a near impossible feat. He drew his sword, mounted his trusty steed, and looked over his soldiers. Their will to fight was palpable; they knew that the Empire's continued existence hinged on this very battle.

Twenty thousand Belgarian troops were still stationed outside the fortress, making their forces over thirty thousand strong in total. However, not even these numbers guaranteed success in a head-on clash.

In Latrielle's hand was the *Armée Victoire Volonté*—one of seven blades forged from trystie and bestowed unto *L'Empereur Flamme*. It was a single-edged straight sword that glimmered silver, believed to bring the wielder victory when two large armies clashed.

"All troops of Belgaria! Follow my lead!"

Spurring his warhorse forward, Latrielle scaled the mountain of rubble—the remains of what had once protected them. Germain lined up beside him, as well as Coigniera of the Seventh Army and the other staff officers who raced to the forefront. Despite their determination, the soldiers' optimism was at an all-time low; unless the top brass took the lead, it was unlikely that anyone would actually leave the fortress.

Latrielle spoke briefly, offering his utmost gratitude to these fine men for their loyalty and valor. All that remained was to give the order for them to charge down the hill. And yet, before he could, he noticed that the High Britannian Army was already pulling away.

"The enemy retreats!" Germain exclaimed.

Latrielle slowed his horse. "What happened...?"

“A messenger, Sir Latrielle! Bearing the flag of the Fourth Army!” Coignière shouted, pointing into the distance.

Unrest quickly spread among the soldiers; this messenger would no doubt inform them who had come out on top in the Fourth Army’s battle against the supply unit. High Britannia must have received a similar message, and whatever it said caused them to fall back.

The officers, who had just moments ago resolved to give their lives in a desperate charge, now noisily awaited the news. The messenger must have come with considerable haste, as his horse collapsed moments before he reached them, a thick foam coming from its mouth. He leapt down and sprinted the rest of the way, finally presenting a wax-sealed note to the prince.

“For you, sir!”

“Message received!” Germain answered, stepping in to take the letter himself. He undid the seal, spread open the paper, and quickly skimmed the contents... then closed one eye as he handed it to Latrielle. The prince knew what this meant; this was a sign they had agreed upon in advance.

Text was still mostly illegible to Latrielle—while he could read it when brought right up to his face, he couldn’t risk his impaired vision becoming known among his subordinates. For that reason, he spent a moment pretending to carefully examine the letter before making a declaration to his troops.

“Attention, men! Attention! The Empire’s Fourth Army has succeeded in taking out the enemy supply unit!”

With that, Latrielle shoved the letter into Germain’s hands, as if silently insisting that it was his job to recite the message—not that Germain had any complaints about this.

““We of the Fourth Army have crushed the High Britannian supply unit, successfully capturing their supplies. We have taken a number of mercenaries prisoner, including the Mercenary King Gilbert; know that the enemy shall not receive any replenishments or reinforcements. As fourteen thousand of our soldiers will arrive by midday on the 9th, the First Army need not do anything drastic...! Focus on defense! Over!”” Germain read aloud, practically shrieking with excitement by the time he reached the end. “It’s our victory, my lord!”

Latrielle glared upward, his eyes watering as he thrust his treasured sword toward the sky. “O Lord in heaven... Glory be to Belgaria!”

The soldiers let loose a tremendous cheer, thrusting up their spears, clanging their swords, and beating at their shields like drums. Men shook hands and tightly hugged one another, many bursting into tears as they were overwhelmed with relief and a flood of other emotions.

As the men continued to celebrate, Latrielle dismounted his horse, sheathed his sword at his waist, and exchanged a firm, reassured handshake with Germain.



That same day, afternoon—

Latrielle returned to the imperial palace, La Branne, bringing along Germain and only ten armored guards. He had yet to even brush the dust of the battlefield from his clothes, but such was the level of urgency. Nobles scowled as he passed and a few maids let out surprised yelps, but he hadn’t the time to care about prettying himself up.

As they walked, Germain finished reading aloud the documents that the staff officers had compiled.

“...What do you think of their proposal?”

“Indeed. If His Majesty permits it, I shall gather the ministers and have it worked into the budget.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We managed to drive back High Britannia, but our losses are great. We need to hurry and rebuild our warfronts, lest we see a repeat of the days of Emperor Vicente.”

The previous emperor, Vicente, had placed an emphasis on the arts, and his many contributions to culture could never be understated. This fixation, however, was also his greatest flaw—he selected his cabinet based on their skill in poetry, dismissing military generals simply because they couldn’t appreciate

a good performance. As a result, the warfronts collapsed.

The Empire lost so much land under Vicente's reign that hostile armies were soon encroaching on the capital, and it wasn't long after that the emperor suddenly succumbed to illness.

There were various theories surrounding Vicente's death, especially considering his young age, with some wondering whether he had been assassinated by the military. The truth remained a mystery, but had he ruled another five years, the Belgarian Empire surely would have fallen into ruin.

Succeeding Vicente was the current emperor, Liam XV. He himself was still young when he took the throne, and so a capable man by the name of Corneille was appointed to the position of marshal general. He reconstructed the warfronts and pushed back the enemy nations.

In the end, Corneille would draw his final breath in a foreign land.

Vicente and Corneille each came to be revered after their deaths—Vicente by artists, and Corneille by soldiers who saw him as the hero who saved the country. Latrielle respected them both, but also learned from their mistakes: neglecting the military would mean the fall of the Empire, but scorning the arts would make Belgaria a nation of cultureless men no better than beasts.

As he walked down the palace corridor, he could hear maddened melodies and vulgar laughter coming from one of the rooms. It couldn't have been a victory party as the outcome of the battle had yet to arrive—that was partly why Latrielle was there in the first place.

Germain grimaced. "What nerve. One wrong step and it would have been the High Britannian Army walking these halls..."

"It is proof of their trust in the First Army," Latrielle said calmly. "Leave them be."

"Sir, they're drinking the day away while so many soldiers have been fighting to protect the capital," Germain replied. He spoke in a lowered voice, but the anger behind his words was still palpable.

Latrielle shared the sentiment. "Something has to change, Germain. By our hand. And not long from now. There is no place for such indolence in the

imperial palace; their seats must be given to loyal subjects who actually contribute to the Empire.”

“Certainly.”

“He should reach his decision soon...”

“...About the succession, you mean?”

“In this war, as the First Army sortied, His Majesty did not even see us off. Belgaria cannot survive unless it continues to fight. If the man cannot stand on the battlefield, then his abdication is inevitable.”

Germain responded with a nod.

I'll broach the subject once I've given my report, Latrielle decided. Up to that point, he had been so fearful of displeasing the emperor that he had avoided bringing up the possibility of an abdication. However, the situation encircling the Empire worsened by the day.

High Britannia could work alongside other foreign powers, mass-produce their new guns, and return with two or three times the troops. In such a case, Belgaria stood no chance of pushing them back. They had evidently already formed a partnership with at least a portion of Germania.

The Empire would need to increase its efforts and erect countermeasures... or else.

Farther down the hall, they spotted the grand chamberlain. He didn't appear to be waiting to greet them, so Latrielle stopped and wondered whether something had happened.

An old man by this point, the grand chamberlain reverently lowered his head. “Why, Prince Latrielle. I must commend your splendid work on the battlefield.”

For many years now, Belgaria had only invaded other nations, so they weren't used to being on the receiving end. And in battle, they were undefeated. The truth of such statements was in reality rather questionable, but whatever the case, “splendid work” had become the template salutation to anyone returning from combat.

Still deeply pained by their immense number of casualties and the

catastrophic damage to Fort Boneire, Latrielle wanted to scream, *“There’s nothing splendid about it!”* But he bit his tongue and saluted.

“Thank you. Is His Majesty in his study?”

“No, he is currently resting.”

“Oh?”

It was still midday, and afternoon naps were by no means an established custom in Belgaria.

“He said that his health was failing him.”

“Is that so? Then I must pay him a visit to wish him well.”

“I ask that you please wait, Prince... He has only just retired.”

“If I see that he is asleep, I will leave him be and return later.”

“Disrupting His Majesty’s rest is impermissible, even if you are his son.”

“I bring reports of the battlefield. And I must urgently consult with him on the policies we are to take henceforth.”

“That certainly is important. All the more reason to wait for him to awaken.”

The grand chamberlain remained firm. It seemed that he wouldn’t let them through no matter what.

Latrielle narrowed his eyes and lowered his voice. “I would understand if we had arrived late at night. But at this hour...? The sovereign who shoulders the fate of the Empire can neither hear a report nor discuss the nation’s impending crisis?”

“His Majesty’s bed chambers are not to be sullied with such matters.”

Latrielle clenched his fists. While the white-haired foggy was indulging in his precious sleep, Germania might have been mass-producing those new guns, or perhaps High Britannia was developing another ship of the line.

If you’re so desperate to sleep, take up arms! Lead an army to crush the enemy! Then you can sleep as much as you want!

As Latrielle and the grand chamberlain stood glaring at one another, a few

maids started passing them by—five in total. They seemed to be carrying clay pots and fruit, as well as silk napkins and water jugs.

“You. Wait.” Latrielle suddenly closed in on one of the women.

“Y-Yes?” she stammered, immediately cowering from his stern tone.

“What’s that you have there?”

“Eh? E-Err... Chapoire Rouge 772, sir.”

He wasn’t concerned about the brand. It was wine.

“Why is someone so ill and bedridden in need of wine?” Latrielle asked, his voice now a low, beast-like growl. Words were unnecessary at this point. He ignored the grand chamberlain completely and walked onward, the man who had blocked him just moments ago now stepping back in the face of such sheer intensity.

Germain followed, as did their ten guards.

They soon came to a large door, beyond which the carpet was a deep shade of crimson—a subtle contrast to the usual lighter red that decorated the floors elsewhere in the palace. From this point onward, only the emperor and his family were permitted entry, with special exceptions being made for attendants and maids.

As Germain naturally came to a stop, Latrielle turned back to him. “Come. I don’t give a damn anymore.”

“Ah... Y-Yes, sir.”

He lowered his head and, with trembling legs, crossed the threshold into the emperor’s chambers. While Latrielle’s sight had recovered considerably, he was still unable to read, so Germain needed to be present in case they came across a letter or some such.

“Remain here and don’t allow anyone through,” Latrielle ordered the guards. His command was promptly met with ten silent salutes.

The corridor they traversed was adorned with ornamentation considered lavish even for the palace, with the walls themselves comparable to fine works of art. A strong scent drifted through the air—a mixture of perfume and alcohol

that immediately rubbed Latrielle the wrong way. Even so, he suppressed the emotions eddying in the pit of his stomach and slowly pressed on.



When they reached the emperor's bedchamber, the door was ajar. The smell that had lingered in the corridor now assaulted the senses, but that wasn't all—mixed in were the subtle stench of old age and that distinct scent of a woman.

"Your Majesty. It's me," Latrielle called from outside. His voice sounded so dark and heavy that he surprised even himself.

"Eep!" came a faint shriek.

"Latrielle...? What is your business?" the emperor asked, his voice hoarse.

"Excuse my audacity," Latrielle responded, stepping into the hallowed room without waiting for his father's approval.

Germain, meanwhile, waited in the hall. Since their conversation was still audible from outside the room, he needed only enter when his services were required.

This was not the first time Latrielle had visited his father's bedchamber—in fact, he had come on numerous occasions, making sure to call in at least once whenever the man was bedridden. There were no windows, the only light coming from the flickering candles that lined the walls, and in the center of the room was a bed larger than even the most extravagant carriage, draped with lace curtains. A single glass and an empty wine jug rolled haphazardly over the bedside table, fruits littered the floor, and... from the bed, three faces peeked out from beneath the silk sheets.

On one side was the emperor's newest consort, Juhaprecia Octovia. She was only fifteen years of age, but the way the sheets clung to her figure made the circumstances he had walked in on all too apparent. On the other was someone Latrielle couldn't name. They seemed to be a child, though he couldn't tell whether they were male or female—they had long hair, feminine features, and skin that was as smooth and elegant as marble. But the chest unhidden by the sheets was as flat as that of a young boy. To see such a person in a place like this only made him even more repulsed.

Sandwiched between the two was the emperor in all his glory, having hurried to hide his lower half under the bedcovers. His body was covered in wrinkles, his skin cracked to such a point that it could have been mistaken for lizard scales. Any traces of muscle had since disappeared, leaving his limbs no more than sinew, with only his stomach retaining its prominence.

His sunken eyes focused on Latrielle, the emperor opened his mouth to speak, lips still plastered with his consort's vermilion lipstick. "If you've returned, that means you have come out victorious."

"...I have," Latrielle replied, forcing down the bile that had risen into his mouth.

The emperor spoke on in the same chipper tone. "Then there is no issue. I entrust the military to you, as I always have."

"Is that all you have to say...?"

"If you are hoping for a reward, you may look through the treasury. Choose whatever you think is befitting of your achievement."

"...I am here not for myself. This crisis concerns the entire Empire. While we managed to push the enemy back this time, we have severely underestimated foreign technology. We must develop countermeasures at once, but there is no such allowance in the royal treasury. We have no choice but to carry out a fundamental restructuring of the national budget."

"Use as much as you need."

At this, Juhaprecia quickly interjected. "Liam? That's all well and good, but you'll still build me a palace in the south, won't you?"

"Of course. I promised you I would."

"You did! That's why I've been working so hard!"

Latrielle cocked his head. "A... palace?"

"It gets so... cold... here in the winter," the emperor responded.

"That's right! Estaburg wasn't this cold. If we move somewhere warmer, Liam, I'm sure those aching hips of yours will be better in no time. Oh, aren't I such a caring wife?"

“Yes, yes...” the emperor mumbled with a nod.

Juhaprecia let out an overjoyed laugh, while the unfamiliar boy or girl wore the sort of incomprehensible smile that only a child could muster. To Latrielle, it was as though everything had suddenly gone dark.

Are my eyes worsening again? Have the candles grown dim?

“Your Majesty,” he began, “if you desire a palace in the south, I shall see to its construction at once. I worry for your health as well. We all do. The temperate climate would surely be ideal for your recuperation, so I truly could not hope for more.”

“Good. Very good. I am glad to hear it.”

“So please... allow me to take over your responsibilities as emperor.”

It was the first time Latrielle had ever brought himself to say it—to ask the emperor for his throne. Alarm bells immediately began to ring in his heart, and he could feel a cold, unpleasant sweat streaming down his back. Would he give up the position so easily? Would this rebellious declaration enrage him? Latrielle’s body quivered more than it ever had on any battlefield.

“Aha... Ahahaha! *Ahahahahahahah!*”

Juhaprecia was the first to react, causing Latrielle’s eyes to widen in shock.

“No can do. Liam still has *a lot* of work to do as emperor~♪”

“Yes, yes...” the emperor murmured in agreement.

What is this woman saying...? Under Belgian tradition, it was impossible for someone in her position to have any say in national affairs.

Juhaprecia gently traced her fingers down her own abdomen, an ecstatic smile spreading across her lips. “We’re going to have a new child soon. Liam is still plenty healthy, you see... so I’ll give him the red-haired, red-eyed son—the *true successor*—that he’s always dreamed of.”

The emperor’s eyes narrowed as he placed his gnarled hand over the woman’s stomach. “Yes... I’m depending on you.”

“Oh, you leave everything to me! I’m still so young and beautiful. Just look at

this skin! So smooth and supple! Why, I'll have a second and a third if you want."

With that, she tore away the silk sheets, revealing her flushed, glistening body. Sweat ran down her skin and onto the bedsheets, her chest rising and falling lasciviously with each heavy breath.

Latrielle immediately turned his gaze back to the emperor, now having to force the words past his lips. "But sire... if a child is born now... it will be another fifteen years before they reach adulthood."

Still giggling to herself, Juhaprecia stepped down from the bed and approached Latrielle, not a thread to obscure her bare form.

"...What?"

Her pale fingers stroking his cheek, she let out a fevered breath as she whispered, "My son is the one who shall become emperor. So scuttle back to the front lines and protect *our* country, won't you?"

Latrielle couldn't muster a word in response. He could only hear a faint whistling noise, which he quickly realized was the air struggling to escape his throat.

This vixen had already devoured the emperor and his assets, and now her eyes were set on the nation itself. She was supposed to be no more than a captive princess, married to subjugate a minor power to the east... and yet they had unknowingly invited such an abhorrent fiend into the imperial court. Under the spell of this young and enchanting witch, the withered old emperor had lost himself. And to see him having invited to his bed someone too young to have even grown into their gender...

While the nation's soldiers were fighting and dying on the battlefield, their emperor indulged in fruit and wine, his spirit sucked away by a demon trying to make the Empire her own. Latrielle could see all too clearly now.

"All this time... the greatest threat to the Empire... has been within its own palace."

"Dear me, how scary..." Juhaprecia sneered. "And where might they be?"

She had a God-given talent for whispering sweet nothings and was more than experienced at using her body to ensnare powerful men. But this was also her downfall—she was akin to a bird that had never experienced the world outside its protective cage, meaning she knew not the scent of a raptor.

Without so much as a sound, Latrielle's right hand shot to his waist, his fingers coiling around the *Armée Victoire Volonté*. His left grabbed the witch before him by the face, sealing her blood-colored lips shut before she had a chance to scream. Then, in one smooth thrust, he plunged the sword straight through her heart.



Juhaprecia's eyes rolled back into her head as she convulsed in Latrielle's arms. Soon enough, her body went limp, collapsing onto him as if desperate for the warmth of a man in her final moments.

When Latrielle drew the blade from her chest, her lifeless body dropped to the floor, arms splayed as though she were a discarded doll. The crimson carpet below was splattered with an even more vivid red.

"Ohh... Ohhhh..."

The emperor had gone pale, letting out uncanny wails as his eyes welled with tears.

The androgynous child wore the same manufactured smile on their face as they screamed—that is, until a dagger whizzed through the air from behind Latrielle and pierced their throat, silencing them forevermore. It had come from Germain, who entered the bedchambers with his silver hair in panicked disarray.

"Are you sure about this!?"

"I exterminated the monster that had made its nest in our Empire," Latrielle replied coolly. "Would you accuse me of wrongdoing?"

"N-No, sir..."

The emperor climbed down from the bed and crawled along the floor, letting out another wail as he clung to Juhaprecia's corpse. "Ohhhhhh..."

"Father... So you actually are capable of affection..." Latrielle murmured, a tinge of surprise in his voice.

"Blood..."

"What?"

"She would have borne me a son... A son with the blood of *L'Empereur Flamme*..."

"...I see."

All this time, the poor fool was blindly chasing the curse of red hair and crimson eyes. Never accomplishing a thing... Never learning to love... He

thought of nothing more than leaving behind the blood of the first emperor.

“Even if that witch birthed a child with red hair,” Latrielle spat, “he would be a monster of a child—the furthest thing from promising the Empire’s prosperity!”

The emperor looked up at him, his eyes red and swollen. How long had it been since Latrielle faced his father so candidly?

The old man’s voice quavered as he spoke. “Oh, Latrielle...”

“What is it, Father?”

“Why...? God, why were you born with blond hair?”

“There was a time when I hated it, too. I detested it, agonized over it, and cursed my mother in my heart as I tore it from my scalp. But now... I am *grateful*. Had I been born with red hair, perhaps I would have suffered the same curse as you, Father. But I was the second son. My hair was not blessed. And so, I devoted myself to my studies. I accrued knowledge and earned trust.”

“Curse...?”

“I pity you—a small man who could only see value in such... *insignificance*. Now, I’ll finally put you to rest.”

“Latrielle...”

“Yes, Father?”

“To think you would kill me... just as Corneille killed my uncle.”

So the previous emperor really had been assassinated. And this old man, who gazed up at Latrielle with pitying eyes, knew all about it.

“Latrielle... Did you know? Corneille too died from a knife in his back.”

“I’ll take your words to heart, Father.”

With that, the treasured sword of the Empire plunged deep into the emperor’s chest. Latrielle’s shoulders rose and fell with each ragged breath. Never before had he been so winded after cutting down only two people.

Germain called to him anxiously. “A-Are you all right, Latrielle, sir?”

“I always believed that... with the emperor gone... I would feel akin to a freed

falcon soaring through the sky. In truth, it is as though my entire body has turned to lead.”

“...That’s a relief.”

“What is?”

“Anyone who can kill their own father without a pang of guilt is little more than a monster.”

“...I suppose so.”

“But Latrielle, my lord... please shoulder this sin and continue moving forward. For the sake of the Empire. Meager as I am, I shall walk the path with you.”

“Germain... Thank you.”

Their eyes met, though neither man wore even the faintest trace of a smile.

“I’ll call in the men to cover this up,” Germain said. “We’ll need a court physician in our faction to give a false diagnosis. Regardless of what happened, it’s a good thing you didn’t wound the emperor’s face.”

“I maintained enough composure to avoid something like that.”

No... just look at all the blood. Composure? Ridiculous, Latrielle sneered at himself.

Germain forced a fearless smile. “Rest at ease. I thought this might happen, so I made sure to bribe a few maids in advance. We’re ready to swap out the bedding, carpet, tapestries, and anything else that was bloodied at a moment’s notice.”

“Excuse me, but... what?”

“A lesson I learned from a certain tactician—prepare for everything that might happen. This was but one possibility.”

“H-Hah... I see.”

“The grand chamberlain will most likely suspect this was an assassination. What shall we do?”

“He is a man who has only his own interests at heart. We may be able to get

him on our side with the right conditions, though should he demand too much, have him taken out.”

“Very well. The vassals who refuse to take bribes shall be sent to the outer reaches—though they’ll run into unfortunate accidents before they arrive.”

“I’ll leave that all to you.”

Germain reverently bowed his head, then looked Latrielle dead in the eye. “This is where it begins, Your Highness.”

“Yes. This marks the beginning...”

The beginning of a new empire.

Latrielle swung the royal sword, flicking the blood from its blade. *I must create a future worth more than all the lives lost to obtain it.*



Imperial Year 851, June 6th—

As the afternoon continued to pass, dark clouds covered the once clear skies, and the heavens themselves opened up to unleash a downpour of rain. It was then that gut-wrenching news struck the capital.

The emperor had died—a tragedy that soured celebrations of the nation’s victory against High Britannia. Sixth Consort Juhaprecia Octovia had gone with him, taking her own life out of grief.

Those in the capital mourned threefold. They had already lost so many soldiers, and now the emperor and his new consort.

And on the next day—the 7th—amid such chaotic times...

Second Prince Alain Deux Latrielle announced his ascendance to the throne.

A History of the Belgarian Empire

Literie

Literie—also known as bedding—has been around since the time when humans lived in caves. It is believed that the first bedsheets were composed of a layer of animal hide spread over the ground. Some time later, people began sleeping on elevated platforms to keep the bugs away, and thus, the bed as we know it was born.

Once pillows were implemented, headboards were needed to keep them from falling off. Around a thousand years ago, beds had taken on essentially the same shape they retain to this very day.

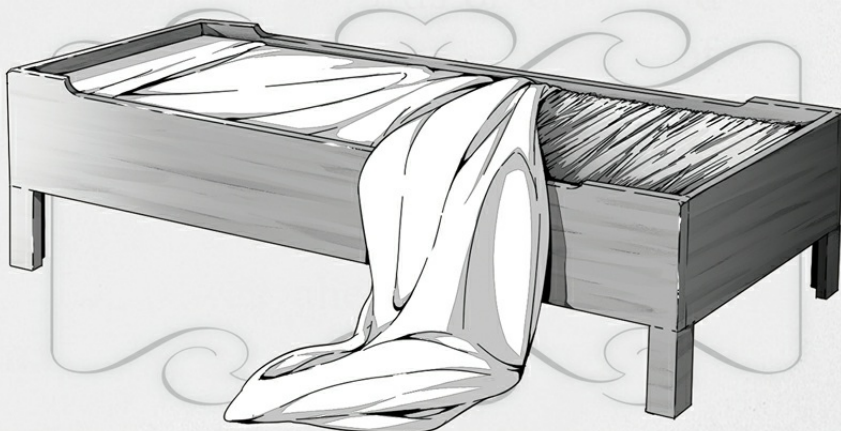
In the year 851 on the Belgarian imperial calendar, it was common practice in the Empire to stuff a wooden frame with straw and lay a cloth sheet over it. Straw, however, easily absorbs moisture and serves as a fine breeding ground for fleas, meaning these beds were far from hygienic. To make matters worse, only a hundred years prior, sharing beds was a commonplace practice. People slept naked by convention, and the inns used by commonfolk did not separate by gender, which meant that just about anyone—even complete strangers—would find themselves sharing a bed in the nude. Some theories posit that these beds became hotspots for contagious diseases, and they are blamed for many large-scale pandemics.

That said, whether or not one slept naked was largely dependent on where they lived—wearing pajamas was a necessity in the much colder lands to the north, for example, which is why Regis wore them during his deployment to Fort Volks. In contrast, those in the warmer far south like Mrs. Elenore continued to sleep in the nude out of habit.

Many nobles wore silk sleepwear and stuffed their mattresses with cotton. For an even heftier fee, some would fill their mattresses with down, but doing this was so expensive that even the wealthy struggled to afford it. Such beds were considered so comfortable that some in the imperial court simply refused to leave them, doing all their work and holding their meetings from beneath the sheets.

Expensive beds came with canopies—a covering supported by four posts, one at each corner, from which a curtain was hung. Not only did these exude luxury, they also kept the mosquitoes at bay. They were, in essence, much more exquisite mosquito nets.

Bedrooms were generally vast, with beds being kept in the center to distance them from the cold stone walls. When bad weather struck, there were times when one would need to stay inside for days on end. It was on these occasions that beds became not just a place of sleep, but of comfort as well.



Des Aliments non P rissables

For a standard household, meals consisted of mainly bread, cheese, and vegetables, with the occasional serving of meat. Eggs and fruit were considered luxuries, as they were too expensive to eat regularly. The imperial army employed over one hundred thousand soldiers, requiring an additional hundred thousand to support them. These numbers required careful planning to maintain, and most of the supplies carried around were food.

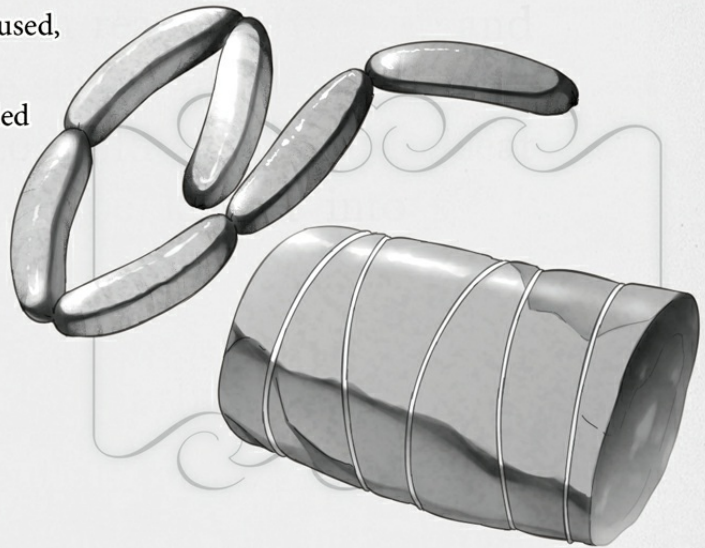
Hard bread became a staple of the battlefield, since it lasted longer before going moldy. Cheese was also eaten regularly—stripping away the moisture during the manufacturing process and applying pressure to the resultant solidified dairy produced a hard variety that could be stored, though it was a tad too hard to be eaten on its own. As well as these, soldiers were often given dried, salt-cured, and even smoked meats, predominantly ham and sausage.

As fresh vegetables did not keep for very long, cabbage was usually sliced into fine strips, mixed with salt and spices, and left to ferment in a barrel. The resultant dish was known in Belgaria as choucroute, though the Germanians called it sauerkraut.

Vitamins had not yet been discovered, but when a soldier came down with a deficiency, they would usually find themselves craving fruits and vegetables. They also occasionally carried onions, dried figs, dried fish, and wine with them.

Unfortunately, no matter what methods were used, food preservation was a far cry from modern-day canning. It was impossible to keep food for extended periods, so long campaigns required the troops to procure their meals on site.

While food supplies were an army's lifeline, transport units seldom received any recognition in the military; they had no promotion prospects and were the butt of many a joke. But a careless supply plan would oftentimes lead to plunder and pillaging in the name of procuring sustenance.



Afterword

Thank you for reading *Altina the Sword Princess VII*. This is the author, Yukiya Murasaki.

This volume was published alongside a book of short stories. I would be overjoyed if you could read them together.

In this volume, Regis's schemes clash head-on with the martial might of Mercenary King Gilbert. The revised regalia finally reaches Altina, who shows just how much she has grown as a commander. Meanwhile, the tactician Oswald works his artifice against Marshal General Latrielle.

I shoved quite a lot into this one, but I hope you enjoyed it and that the final developments took you by surprise. I've also saved some of the episodes that wouldn't fit here for the next volume...

Latrielle proclaims his ascendance to the throne. How will Altina act in response!?

As a side note, a manga that I worked on called *Koma Hibiki* (serialized in Fujimi Shobo's *Dragon Age*) has released its second volume.

My thanks—

To my illustrator, himesuz-sensei. You always provide such wonderful illustrations. We've been getting hot and cold spells lately, so please take care of yourself. I worry about your health.

To Yamazaki-sama and Nishino-sama from Afterglow. Thank you for another tasteful design.

To my editor, Wada-sama. I know one was a compilation of short stories, but getting two books out at once was pretty hectic... It's all thanks to you that everything worked out. At least, I hope everything worked out.

To everyone in the Famitsu Bunko editorial department, everyone involved in the production, and to my family and friends who continue to support me.

And of course, my greatest thanks to you, dear reader, for reading this far!
Thank you!

Yukiya Murasaki



Thank you so
much for reading
volume 7!

Clarisse
didn't have
much of a role
this time,
so I went and
drew her.

Murasaki-sama,
Wada-sama,
I really enjoyed
reading this
volume.

Thank you.



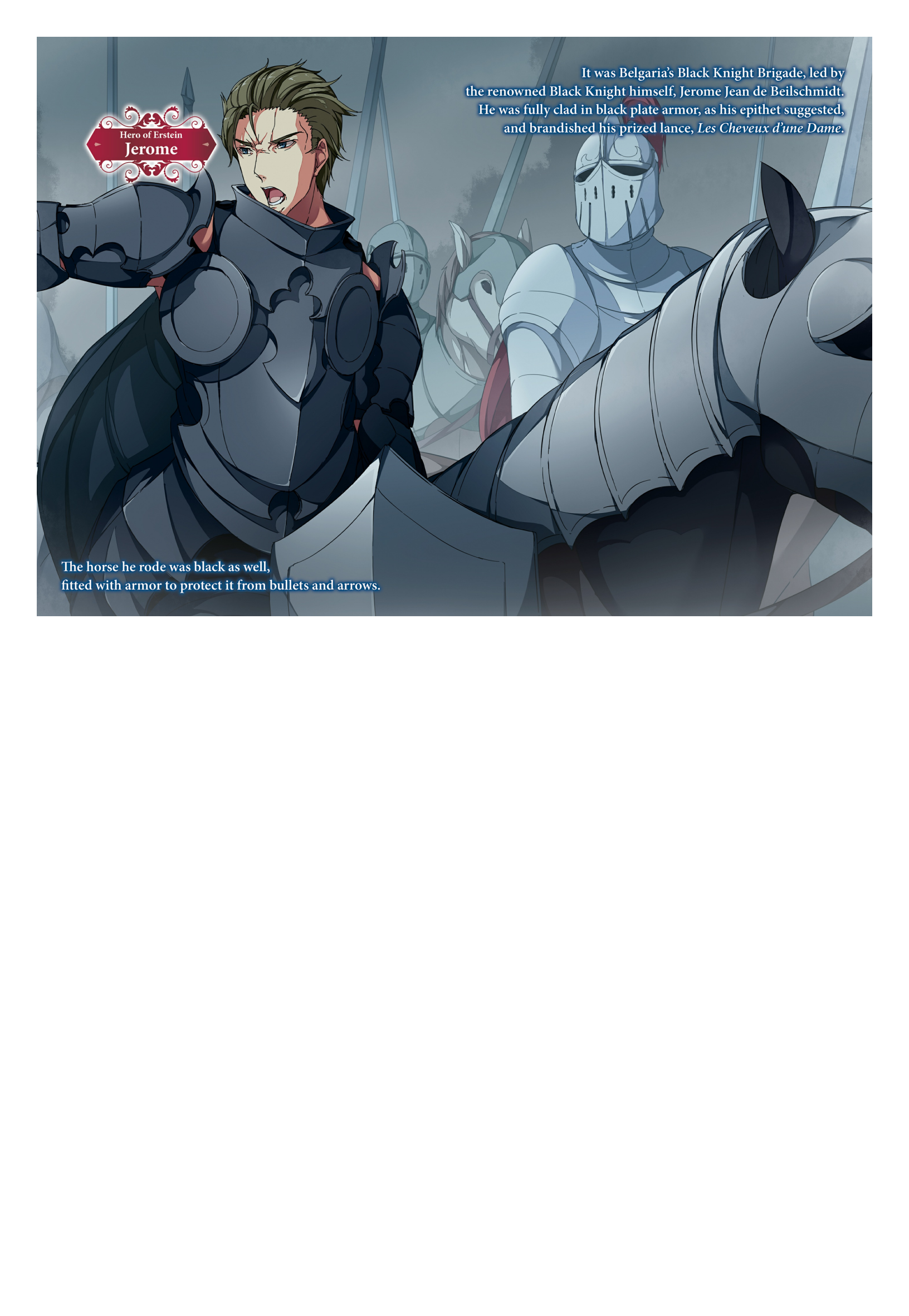


Sword-Wielding Princess
Altina

“Do you
think we
can win?”

Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis

“Allow me to put it
this way— if we fail to defeat
the enemy’s supply unit under
the current circumstances, then
I’d have to suspect they have
a *real* wizard in their ranks.”



Hero of Erstein

Jerome

It was Belgaria's Black Knight Brigade, led by the renowned Black Knight himself, Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt. He was fully clad in black plate armor, as his epithet suggested, and brandished his prized lance, *Les Cheveux d'une Dame*.

The horse he rode was black as well, fitted with armor to protect it from bullets and arrows.

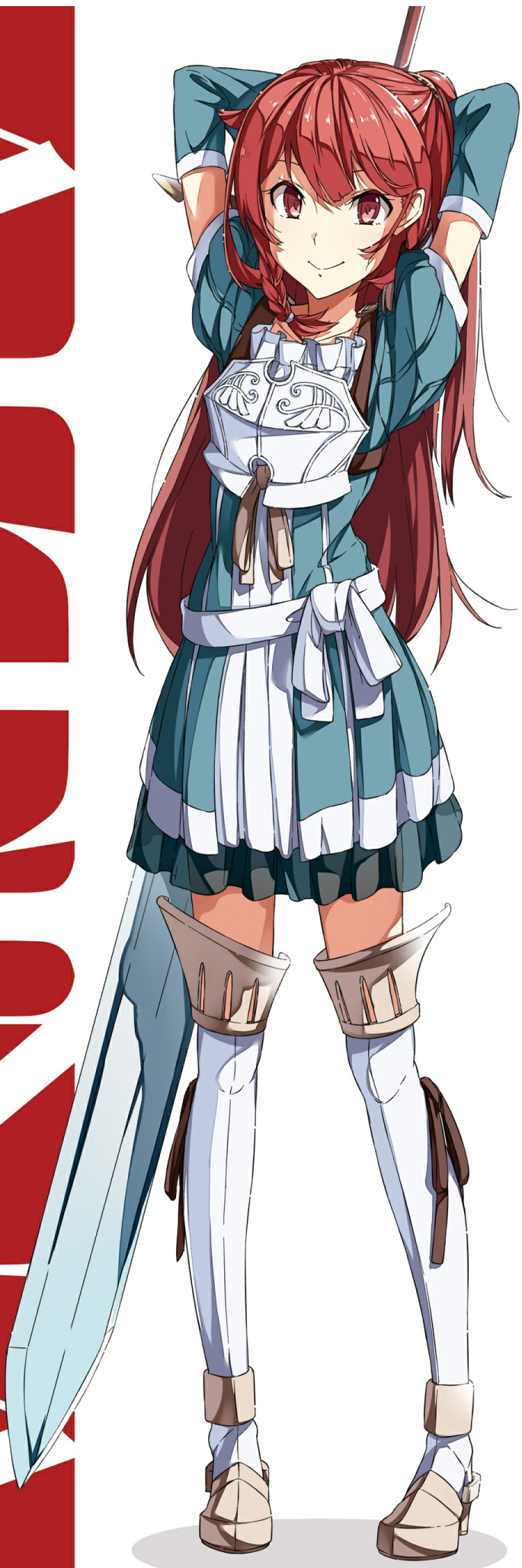


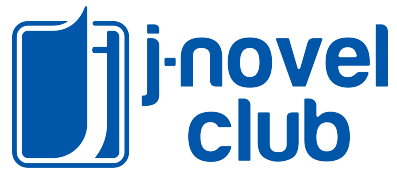
“It is a
pleasure
to make your
acquaintance,
princess of
the Empire.”

Mercenary King
Gilbert

“A three-pointed
spear... You must be
Gilbert Schweinzeberg,
the Mercenary King.”

ARIA the Sword Princess





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Altina the Sword Princess: Volume 7

by Yukiya Murasaki

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